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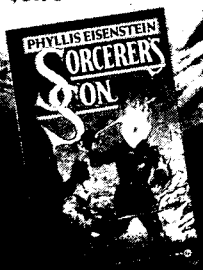

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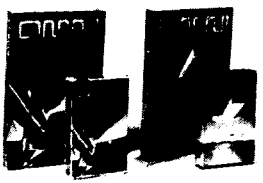

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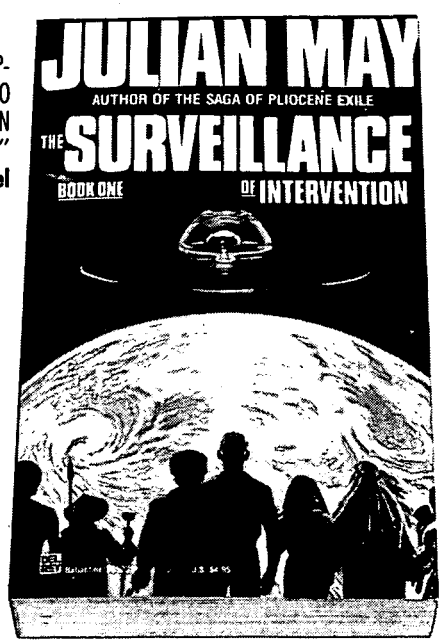

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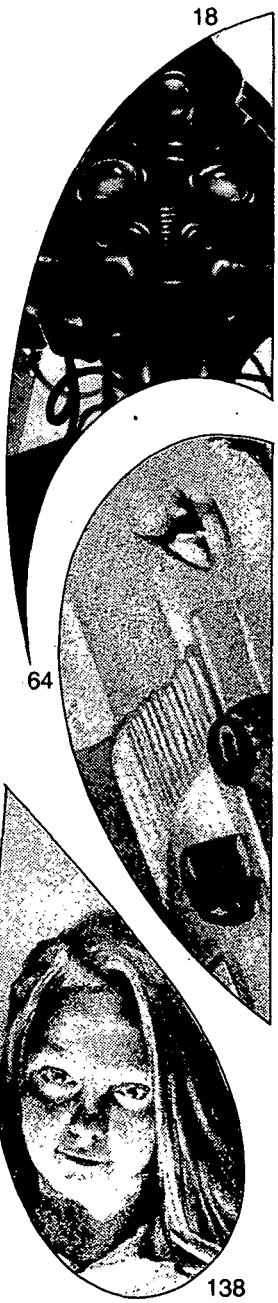

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

FEMINISM

In the April 1988 issue of *Asimov's* the lead in the letter column is a note by Bob Silverberg, praising "At the Cross-Time Jaunter's Ball," by a writer Bob refers to as "this guy Alexander Jablokov." He says, "Amazing the way guys this good keep coming out of nowhere."

In my answer, I pick up the refrain by saying "These guys, Bob—" Then, later in the reply I say "these youngsters."

We have now received a letter from Jackson, Mississippi, by a young lady who says "You and Bob Silverberg should be utterly ashamed of yourselves for referring to these 'guys' who keep writing excellent new stories!" She goes on to refer to a number of women science fiction writers whom we have published and then says, "I am amazed that someone as enlightened as yourself could make such a faux pas and allow your esteemed magazine to be tainted by such a blatantly sexist remark by Mr. Silverberg without a rebuttal."

I don't blame the young lady for being exercised by this, or for writing to protest. Women have been unfairly oppressed by men through virtually all of history and whatever rage they now express is light-years short of evening the score. However, as a feminist myself (for all that I am a member of the oppressing gender), I would like to see us attack the real targets and not waste our efforts too freely on fringe trivialities.

In the first place, Bob Silverberg is *not* a male chauvinist. He happened to be referring to a male author, "this guy Alexander Jablokov" and so he automatically spoke of "guys." In the second place, "guy" has become a piece of virtually genderless slang. At least, I have heard many young women say to other young women, "Hey, guys—" And finally, as I have already said, having picked up Bob's use of "guys" in an automatic attempt at balance, I went on to make use of the genderless "youngsters." In this case, therefore, I honestly don't think that Bob and I should be pilloried.

But let's go on to my thesis that to pick on the minutiae of the English language, however useful and even necessary, should not be allowed to take our attention away from the core problem. Let me explain.

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In the kind of patriarchal society that has existed in the west, a woman's hope for social status, economic security, and personal fulfillment, could only arise from marrying the right man. She could not (except in the most exceptional circumstances) gain it in her own right. Society simply didn't allow it. So she sought a man who was a "good provider"; someone with status in the community; someone who was sober, steady, capable, ambitious, and so on.

Men, whether consciously or not, aimed for this sort of thing and labored hard to get it (unless they happened to be born into wealth and status to begin with), since they knew that not only would they have the comfort and security of position and wealth, but they would also have their choice of women. If you like, then, males were bribed by society into trying to be achievers. They might not all make it, but it was natural for them to try.

Women, on the other hand, were given a more limited target—men. They had to catch the right man and, if so, all else would follow. If they didn't, nothing would follow, whatever their talents and drive. To catch men, women had to advertise their abilities in the kitchen and bedroom. They had to parade their domestic qualifications, their cooking and sewing; and they had to dress in such a way as to emphasize their secondary sexual characteristics and learn to behave in a seductive manner. This was

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forced on them; it was part of the oppression; but it was *there.*

Furthermore, women had to suppress their intelligence. Men, in the strong competition of the marketplace, were often forced to accept loss, defeat, inferiority. They weren't going to accept it at home, too. Women served as a built-in object designed to demonstrate to a man, always and forever, his own superiority to *someone.* Therefore, women early learned that they must not show undue signs of intelligence for that would "turn off" the men on whom they set their sights. They therefore cultivated a charming stupidity, until, too often, it became natural and ineradicable.

What gets me now is that in a world in which women are striving hard to achieve social and economic equality, in which they are trying to prove themselves able to take on "men's work," in which they would like to be executives, decision-makers, and creative personalities, so many of them still cannot bring themselves to give up the stigmata of inferiority. They still go through the motions of selling their bodies as though that were all they had to sell. They still paint their faces like clowns and wear clothes designed for seduction rather than serviceability. (There are exceptions, I know, so don't bother quoting them to me. There are exceptions to everything.)

And they still have that lingering desire to hang on to the safety of stupidity.

Some time ago, I met a young woman who introduced herself to me as a lawyer. I said, "Yes, everywhere you look you find women becoming lawyers. But do you know why?"

Naturally, she said, "Why?"

And I said, "Because it's the one profession that requires absolutely no mathematics."

Think about it. There seems to be almost a social law that women must be ignorant of mathematics. (There are exceptions, I know, so don't bother quoting them to me. There are exceptions to everything.) And by mathematics I don't mean group theory and differential equations. I mean arithmetic.

I've lost track of the number of women who have said to me, with a giggle (*always* with a giggle), "I couldn't add up a column of figures to save my life."

They may be right, and there are probably many men who can't be trusted to add up a column of figures to save their lives—but men don't *boast* about it. They don't giggle over it. They know that the inability to do simple arithmetic is bound to make it far more difficult for them to gain power in the world by any means other than brute force.

Women apparently don't see mathematical ignorance as a deficiency. They have been taught to consider their lack of knowledge as to the product of 29 and 14 as "cute." A woman must have some vague notion that if she says to a man, "Could you please multiply

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29 and 14 for me? I'm so stupid about these things," that he will marry her on the spot out of sheer relief that he has finally found someone he can feel superior to.

So let us move back to science fiction. When I was young and entered the field, it was written, almost entirely, by and for men (young men, in particular). With time, women entered the field, however, and now the number of first class women writers compares quite favorably with the number of first class men writers.

This is no particular surprise to me. Back in the 1920s and 1930s women took over the field of mystery writing. It was the Agatha Christies, the Dorothy Sayers, the Ngaio Marshes, and so on who were the big guns. So why should they not be proficient writers of science fiction, as well?

Yet it seems to me that in science fiction, women are just a little more likely to write fantasy rather than science fiction; to write soft science fiction rather than hard science fiction. Women flock to those portions of science fiction that, like the legal profession, require no mathematics.

Well, what's wrong with that?

Only this—that it's a confession of women's inferiority. It leaves science to men; it leaves engineering to men; it leaves entirely too much to men.

There are certain ways in which men and women are biologically different. Men are larger and stronger, and women have to bear and suckle young. There is, however, no biological difference in mentality—at least I don't believe there is—and I don't want women to seem to be conceding that there is.

If women want social and economic equality with men then they have to be prepared to face the difficulties of that equality. They can't just pick and choose and take those places in society that don't ask too much of them. They have to grab at those places that will demand as much of them as of men.

It's not easy, I know, but if women want to make a revolution, they can't rely on having it handed to them by men. They'll have to sweat at it, themselves. They can't do it in high heels, and they can't stop every five minutes to touch up their lipstick.

And they shouldn't waste their time working up a terrific head of steam over the use of the word "guys." I'd rather see them working up a terrific head of steam over the necessity of doing away with the cultivation of feminine stupidity by women themselves. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

This is a fan letter, and a thank-you letter as well. Ever since I was introduced to your work at the age of thirteen or so, you have been my favorite author. I know that whenever I pick up something you have written, I will enjoy it. I enjoy your science fiction best of all, and after that your autobiographical writings. I'm sure you are anxious to get back to your writing, so I will come to the point as quickly as I can. When I was fifteen, I read your collection *The Early Asimov*. More than the stories, I loved your accounts of your early efforts, and after I finished it, it made me think, "Well, maybe *I* can be a writer, too." Shortly afterwards, I wrote a story and sent it in to *IAsfm,* which rejected it very nicely. I'm not sure whether or not I tried anywhere else, but in any case, I put it away for several years.

That was eight years ago. Two years ago, I took a children's literature course, and, during that course, I remembered the story I had written, and realized it was probably much more suited to younger readers. Eventually I found a magazine that seemed to be a suitable place for my story, and sent it in to them after polishing it up somewhat. (I found it startling and disappointing to see just how many children's magazines specifically do *not* want science fiction submitted to them.)

Today, I received a letter of acceptance from that magazine. It may be some time before the story is published, but I am so excited and happy about this that I thought I just had to write and thank you for the encouragement you gave me, albeit unknowingly. I have often thought of writing you a fan letter, but always had it in the back of my mind to wait until I had sold a story, and now I have, so here it is. I have never written a fan letter before, so I am at a loss for words with which to continue. In any case, I have said all that I wanted to. Thank you once again, both for your work and your inspiration.

Affectionately and admiringly Yours,

Ruth O'Neill
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada

It makes me feel a little uncomfortable to print a letter that is so filled with praise of me, personally. ("So! Asimov! Your mountainous ego is showing again!") Still it is so pleasant to read of a writer who perseveres through discouragement and finally achieves a sale that I want others to read it, too.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Editorial Director:

I have read some of your science fiction stories—and I find them to be quite interesting. But moreover, I love to read the letters written to you by your avid science fiction readers. Do you have a book written with just the letters from them? If you do I would sure love to have a copy of it on my bookshelf!

Mr. Colin Swinney
A new reader

There was once a time when I thought of publishing a book of funny and/or ridiculous letters I received, but I thought of the trouble of collecting the letters, the difficulties of avoiding hurting people, and the possibility of being sued for invasion of privacy even if I didn't identify the writers. It doesn't matter. I have other books to write.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac,

I have been enjoying your magazine for many months now and I would like to thank you for bringing it to me. The only thing I have not enjoyed is the letters from snivelers picking at every little thing they can find. Some people just take life too seriously.

A special thanks for giving us the chance to read Harlan Ellison's screenplay for *I, Robot:The Movie.* It was great. I had let three or four months worth of *IAsfms* pile up; so I read all three installments in one reading. This would make a fantastic movie with the right crew, cast, and *budget.* I hope that you are wrong and one day it will be made. Perhaps a barrage of letters from *IAsfm* readers would convince the studio that potential profit is more important than petty politics and bruised egos. Let my letter be the first. Make the damn movie, but do it right!

I also have a little creative input for the movie if I may be so bold. In addition to the specific pieces of music mentioned in the screenplay, I would suggest an original futuristic soundtrack penned by the likes of Jethro Tull, Pink Floyd, Roger Waters, The Moody Blues, Jean Michel Jarre, or others of equal calibre. That's my two cents' worth.

N. Laurence Moss
Victoria, British Columbia
Canada

PS: Mr. Ellison shouldn't worry too much. There are more people than we can count with the brain of an artichoke in this world.

No, no, we must *have letters from snivelers and we* must *print some of them. Heaven forefend that we get only favorable letters and print a selection, and find ourselves wildly accused of censoring out unfavorable ones.*

—Isaac Asimov

Gentlemen:

I enjoyed your January 1988 issue, in particular Connie Willis's satire, "Ado." However, I am puzzled by a detail in that story. One character says "Bryant was a Theist, which is the same thing as a Satanist." Now, I take it that Bryant was a Deist, not a Theist. A Deist has intellectually derived a First Cause who made the universe and then went away, having nothing more to do with it (and

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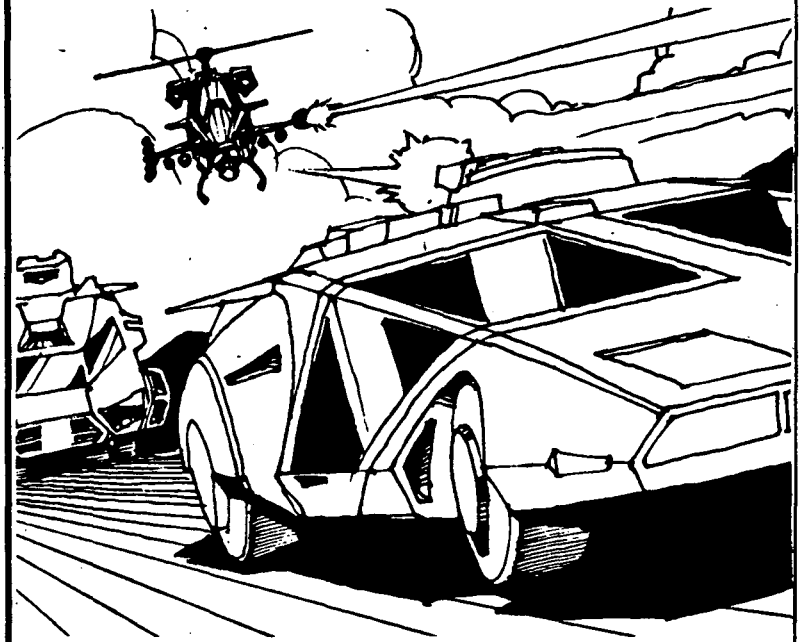

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leaving us "lost out here in the stars," as it says in the lyrics to one of Kurt Weill's songs). On the other hand, a Theist believes that God takes an active part in his universe, nourishing and sustaining it. The Christian religion is certainly theistic, as are Islam and, presumably, Satanism. There seems to be some doubt about Judaism because the traditional Jew feels that God is unknowable and there also seems to be an implication that a Theist admits the validity of theology (the study of God).

Now to my item of confusion: I can't decide whether Ms. Willis inadvertently used the wrong word or whether I am missing some subtlety. Could it be that the *character* doesn't know the difference, and that was used as a further illustration of the shallowness of her objections to Shakespeare? Or could it be that my memory of the works of William Cullen Bryant has gone the way of my memory of thermodynamics and that Bryant really *was* a Theist. In that case, the girl is arguing against her own viewpoint isn't she?

Perhaps I'm making "the hills, rock-ribbed, and ancient as the sun" (William Cullen Bryant) out of a hoot—or a tor out of a typo?

The Rt. Rev. Dean Bekken
La Jolla, CA

As far as I'm concerned, a "Deist" is someone who believes in a Latin god, and a "Theist" is someone who believes in a Greek god. They are the same word, allowing for the difference in linguistic derivation. If a theologian decides to make a distinction that's fine, but every theologian may make his own distinction and someday they may fight wars over it.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Doctor Asimov,

As a lawyer familiar with legal practice in both Japan and the U.S., I'd like to respond to J.M. Conyer's letter (April '88) commenting on your editorial on a united world government. The establishment of such a government has been a goal sought through the ages—by men named Caesar and Hitler and Tojo. Far more important than the *size* of a state is the *form* of that state. By quoting Shakespeare on starting a change of governments by "getting rid of all the lawyers," Mr. Conyer seems to be agreeing with the conspirators of *Henry VI* that legal advocates for individual rights make it difficult for oligarchies to impose their programs on society.

There is certainly a tendency for science fiction societies to be either benign or malign oligarchies at one end, or malign or benign anarchies at the other. Seldom do science fiction authors recognize that one of the primary functions of the attorney is to champion the cause of private citizens against the power of government. The impotence of the legal profession in the Soviet Union and the Chinese People's Republic is a direct reflection of the particular balance struck in those societies between the rights of individuals and the power of bureaucracies. The American formula is certainly at the other extreme, but we lack the extended social consensus on behavior, and uniformity of class and race, that al-

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lows Japan to get along with fewer lawyers. If we ever attain a world government that does not infringe on free will, it will have to deal with the type of pluralistic religious and cultural and racial milieu that we are growing toward in the United States. For such a state to be both peaceful and free, it will have to be governed by law, and people will have a right to hire advocates who know the law.

Raymond Takashi Swenson
J.D., LL.M. Environmental Law
Omaha, NB

If you want to consider a lawyer's trick, think of characterizing world government as something wanted "by men named Caesar and Hitler and Tojo." There are different kinds of world government and damning them all by a snide innuendo is what makes the legal profession a hissing and byword to so many. I want a democratic world government. Is that what Hitler wanted? Hitler (I believe) washed his hands before eating. Does that mean we must never wash our *hands? So behave yourself.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Co.,

First of all, I would like to congratulate you for your wonderful magazine. I subscribed to it about a year and a half ago and I've enjoyed every issue since the first. I even gave subscriptions to a couple of my friends. I particularly liked the serial of *I, Robot* published in the November, December, and Mid-December issues.

It is about that serial that I am now writing to you. Being an undergraduate student in physics, I was very surprised to read that Heisenberg's uncertainty relation is $E = hv$. Any good physics textbook will tell you that $E = hv$ is the Einstein-Planck relation. Heisenberg has two uncertainty relations: $\Delta \times \Delta\rho \geq \hbar$ and $\Delta E \Delta t T \geq \hbar$. I guess this changes the script a little since those expressions are a little longer to say than just $E = hv$. Sorry about that. One more thing. Maxwell's equations as stated in *I, Robot* are the general equations, and are not applied only to light but to the full electromagnetic spectrum.

Well, that's all for today's class.

Sonya Delisle
Ste-Foy, Quebec
Canada

This is my fault entirely. I remember that perhaps ten years ago, Harlan called me to ask about the use of equations and I gave him the Planck equation and, in an extraordinary fit of madness, called it the Uncertainty equation. So please hold Harlan blameless.

—Isaac Asimov

To whom it may concern:

I am writing once again to express my despair at the replacement of the perfectly good On Books column by one of Norman Spinrad's "essays." If you must include Mr. Spinrad's opinions in your magazine, would you please relegate him to a Viewpoint column rather than replacing your book *review* column with a book *analysis* column.

Richard Akerman
Sackville, New Brunswick
Canada

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Is this more than a semantic distinction? If you have a department that is entitled "On Books," it might be a series of short "What I Like and Don't Like about a Particular Book," or it might be a "Philosophy about Science Fiction Books in General." Surely both types of comments are "On Books."

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov;

I received the January issue when I picked up the mail yesterday; I finished reading it this evening. My congratulations on an exceptionally readable collection of stories and feature articles! Now I shall have to keep an eye out for Michael Bishop's *Unicorn Mountain* when it finally manages to grace our local booksellers' racks, and hope that Robert Silverberg continues to write the excellent short fiction *IAsfm* has been publishing. I am developing a taste for his stories, I find.

So much for that. What really prompted this letter was your editorial "Suicide." I imagine that you are going to receive no end of mail on the subject you have broached —the need for carefully regulated euthanasia—and some, if not a great deal of it, is bound to be rather virulent, so I can well understand the reluctance you admit to having about even writing the piece.

My own feelings about euthanasia are very parallel to your own. I agree that it cannot be unregulated—governments and their associated structures are imperfect at best but someone has to define and enforce acceptable limits to minimize abuse and they happen to be the best we have available to do it. There will always be some abuse of the privilege, but proper legislation and enforcement could conceivably reduce the level of improper use of euthanasia now occurring, as well as greatly reducing the trauma inflicted upon those individuals who defy current law out of genuine love and concern. My own family has been very fortunate not to have had to deal with that dilemma—at least within my own memory. But I have heard about it often enough in the news, dealt with the problem of terminally ill or injured pets, and talked to people who have had relatives, friends, or acquaintances who might have welcomed having the option available, whether or not they would have used it. It is ironic, is it not, that in the name of civilization and morality our society can be so inhumane?

So you may count me in on the side of the "yes votes" in this. It is perhaps an odd topic for a SF magazine editorial, but it does need addressing, and social commentary is a common theme in the fiction *IAsfm* publishes, isn't it?

Yours sincerely,

Mrs. Laura Lee Life
Charlie Lake, British Columbia
Canada

I have indeed received much mail on the subject, some of it quite heated. It's not really an odd topic for a science fiction editorial, when a famous science fiction writer commits suicide.

—Isaac Asimov

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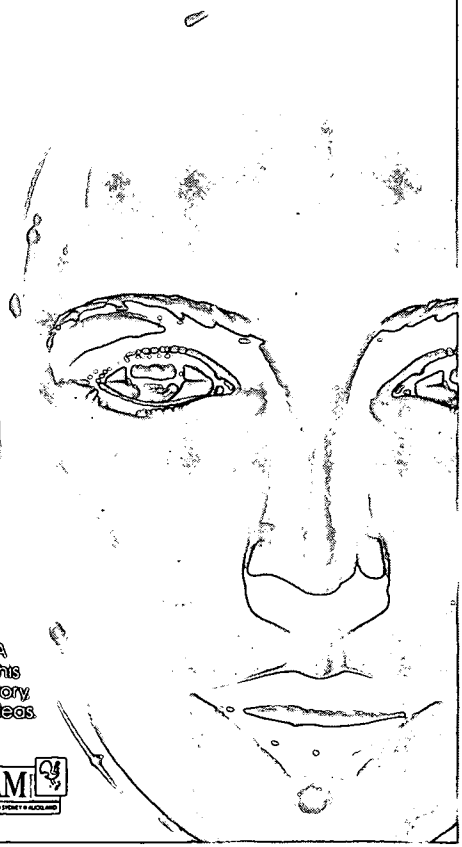
The new masterpiece by
"science fiction's hottest author."
Rolling Stone

MONA LISA OVERDRIVE

WILLIAM GIBSON

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF NEUROMANCER



Step into William Gibson's future, a world at once lyrical and mechanistic, erotic and violent, thought-provoking and mind-bending. It is a world in which multinational corporations and free-lance high-tech outlaws jockey for power, traveling into the bizarre, computer-generated universe known as cyberspace.

The *Washington Post* called Gibson's award-winning *Neuromancer* "an amazing virtuoso performance... state of the art." Now, three years later, MONA LISA OVERDRIVE shows Gibson cutting his way into still more highly charged territory, with chilling action and provocative ideas. It's the state of tomorrow's art.

BANTAM

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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

It's been interesting watching designers from the world of board and role-playing games appear on the credits for some outstanding computer games. Not too long ago I wrote about Arnold Hendrick —designer of *Barbarian Prince,* a classic solo game—and his work on Microprose's *Pirates.*

Lately, Michael A. Stackpole, well-known in role-playing circles, has been working on some interesting computer projects, bringing the special flare of an experienced role-playing designer.

Mike's past work includes designing *Mercenaries, Spies,* and *Private Eyes* for Flying Buffalo, as well as numerous solitaire rp adventures. At the same time that I was designing *Wheel of Destruction,* a solo module featuring the Joker for Mayfair Games' *DC Heroes* role-playing game, Mike was preparing the mammoth *Batman Sourcebook,* the final word on the Caped Crusader.

But his latest endeavors have been in the computer field. *Wasteland* and *The Bard's Tale III: Thief of Fate* (both from Electronic Arts, 1820 Gateway Drive, San Mateo, CA 94404), while not solo efforts, each show the practiced hand of the experienced designer. I'll talk about *Wasteland* in a future column. But now a look at the continuing saga of The Bard's Tale.

The Bard's Tale is, of course, the award-winning fantasy role-playing game. Critically well-received and immensely popular, Bard's Tale I and II have long been favorites. And this new release will not disappoint fans.

The plot is as sketchy as it should be. The Mad God Tarjan has laid siege to the fair city of Skara Brae, unleashing foul creatures that have left it in ruins. Now the Mad God is moving on to the Six Cities of the Plains . . . and guess who has to stop him?

Yes, you must create a hearty band of adventurers and face the Evil One himself. It will help if you are properly armed with the right collection of spells, objects, and words to defeat him. Succeed, and Skara Brae will be restored to its former joy. Fail, and you'll have to re-boot the disc and try again.

The mechanics of Bard's Tale couldn't be easier. You can, at the ruins, form your own party—choosing from Humans, Elves,

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Dwarfs, Hobbits, and others, each with their own special attributes. Dwarfs are strong and healthy—helpful when an arctic wolf is munching on one's ankle—while Hobbits are A#1 thieves. (Their slogan, we are told, is "A locked door is soon no more.")

Classes are selected with possibilities ranging from the Warrior to Wizard. Every party should also have a Bard . . . music can do more than simply soothe the savage beast.

But if real life exerts irresistible time pressures, you can select the pre-generated party . . . a nice mix of races and classes, with some good fighters and two different types of magicians. You can easily check the status of any of the party so that keeping posted on what items they have and what spells they know is no difficult task.

Once the party is all set, the adventure in the wilderness begins. A simple map is included showing the Ruins of Skara Brae, the Old Dwarf Mine, Scrapwood Tavern and a half dozen other key locations, but you'll have to do a good amount of judicious wandering. There's an automapping feature that can tell you just where you are in relation to the movements, and it's very helpful for lazy types like me who tend to just hit the road sans graph paper.

The screen is neatly organized, with the characters at the bottom, a text information window on the top right and a straight ahead viewscreen at the top left. And here's where we come to one of the wonderful things about The Bard's Tale III. The graphics are terrific, filled with atmosphere and menace. Creatures in fantasy computer games can sometimes look like no more than colorful blobs. Here the images are striking, from the moving lips of the opening title Bard playing his jaunty tune, to the host of monsters and demons that dog your journey. Combat decisions are made quickly, and the program wastes no time in giving you the results. You can change the weapons used by your fighters and select the magical spells that will most aid your party.

It doesn't take long before you reach your first dungeon, a Catacombs guarded by a monk who demands the name of the Mad God. And then you enter the cool darkness. A quick spell can fix you up with enough light to gain some gold and information.

I have only one complaint . . . but it's one that vexes the entire computer role-playing field. Before you can play The Bard's Tale III you have to copy the sides of the master discs . . . a process that annoys the heck out of me. I can only marvel at people who can sit by their computer console, happily swapping discs back and forth.

Many hands helped make this addition to The Bard's Tale. But Michael A. Stackpole's work on the story, text, and maps has certainly helped make this game one I can easily recommend. ●

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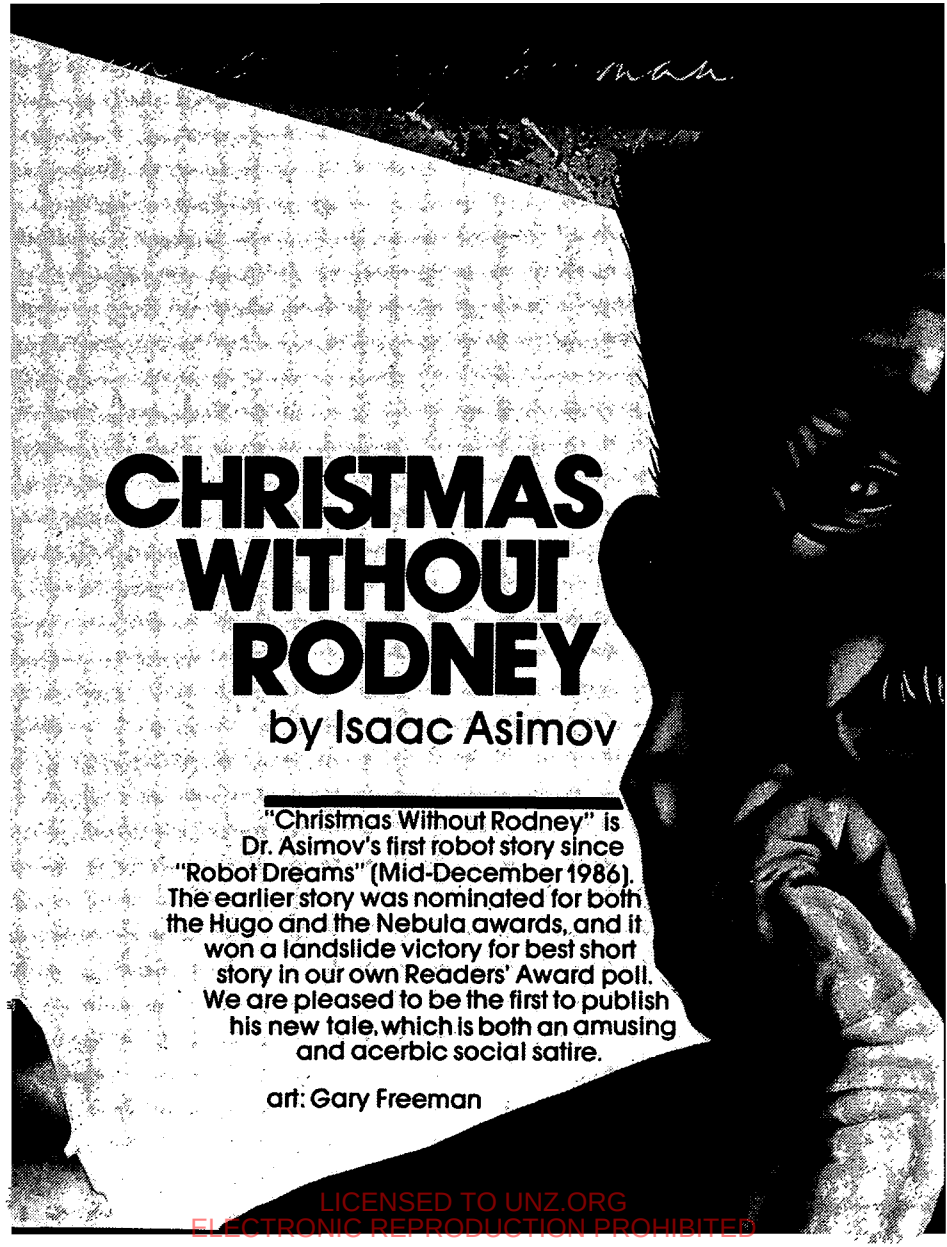

CHRISTMAS WITHOUT RODNEY

by Isaac Asimov

"Christmas Without Rodney" is Dr. Asimov's first robot story since "Robot Dreams" (Mid-December 1986). The earlier story was nominated for both the Hugo and the Nebula awards, and it won a landslide victory for best short story in our own Readers' Award poll. We are pleased to be the first to publish his new tale, which is both an amusing and acerbic social satire.

art: Gary Freeman

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It all started with Gracie (my wife of nearly forty years) wanting to give Rodney time off for the holiday season and it ended with me in an absolutely impossible situation. I'll tell you about it if you don't mind because I've got to tell *somebody*. Naturally, I'm changing names and details for our own protection.

It was just a couple of months ago, mid-December, and Gracie said to me, "Why don't we give Rodney time off for the holiday season? Why shouldn't he celebrate Christmas, too?"

I remember I had my optics unfocused at the time (there's a certain amount of relief in letting things go hazy when you want to rest or just listen to music) but I focused them quickly to see if Gracie were smiling or had a twinkle in her eye. Not that she has much of a sense of humor, you understand.

She wasn't smiling. No twinkle. I said, "Why on Earth should we give him time off?"

"Why not?"

"Do you want to give the freezer a vacation, the sterilizer, the holoviewer? Shall we just turn off the power supply?"

"Come, Howard," she said. "Rodney isn't a freezer or a sterilizer. He's a *person*."

"He's not a person. He's a robot. He wouldn't want a vacation."

"How do you know? And he's a *person*. He deserves a chance to rest and just revel in the holiday atmosphere."

I wasn't going to argue that "person" thing with her. I know you've all read those polls which show that women are three times as likely to resent and fear robots as men are. Perhaps that's because robots tend to do what was once called, in the bad old days, "women's work" and women fear being made useless, though I should think they'd be delighted. In any case, Gracie *is* delighted and she simply adores Rodney. (That's *her* word for it. Every other day she says, "I just adore Rodney.")

You've got to understand that Rodney is an old-fashioned robot whom we've had about seven years. He's been adjusted to fit in with our old-fashioned house and our old-fashioned ways and I'm rather pleased with him myself. Sometimes I wonder about getting one of those slick, modern jobs, which are automated to death, like the one our son, DeLancey, has, but Gracie would never stand for it.

But then I thought of DeLancey and I said, "How are we going to give Rodney time off, Gracie? DeLancey is coming in with that gorgeous wife of his" (I was using "gorgeous" in a sarcastic sense, but Gracie didn't notice—it's amazing how she insists on seeing a good side even when it doesn't exist) "and how are we going to have the house in good shape and meals made and all the rest of it without Rodney?"

"But that's just it," she said, earnestly. "DeLancey and Hortense could

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bring *their* robot and he could do it all. You *know* they don't think much of Rodney, and they'd love to show what theirs can do and Rodney can have a rest."

I grunted and said, "If it will make you happy, I suppose we can do it. It'll only be for three days. But I don't want Rodney thinking he'll get every holiday off."

It was another joke, of course, but Gracie just said, very earnestly, "No, Howard, I will talk to him and explain it's only just once in a while."

She can't quite understand that Rodney is controlled by the three laws of robotics and that nothing has to be explained to him.

So I had to wait for DeLancey and Hortense, and my heart was heavy. DeLancey is my son, of course, but he's one of your upwardly mobile, bottom-line individuals. He married Hortense because she has excellent connections in business and can help him in that upward shove. At least, I hope so, because if she has another virtue I have never discovered it.

They showed up with their robot two days before Christmas. The robot was as glitzy as Hortense and looked almost as hard. He was polished to a high gloss and there was none of Rodney's clumping. Hortense's robot (I'm sure she dictated the design) moved absolutely silently. He kept showing up behind me for no reason and giving me heart-failure every time I turned around and bumped into him.

Worse, DeLancey brought eight-year-old LeRoy. Now he's my grandson, and I would swear to Hortense's fidelity because I'm sure no one would voluntarily touch her, but I've got to admit that putting him through a concrete mixer would improve him no end.

He came in demanding to know if we had sent Rodney to the metal-reclamation unit yet. (He called it the "bust-up place.") Hortense sniffed and said, "Since we have a modern robot with us, I hope you keep Rodney out of sight."

I said nothing, but Gracie said, "Certainly, dear. In fact, we've given Rodney time off."

DeLancey made a face but didn't say anything. He knew his mother.

I said, pacifically, "Suppose we start off by having Rambo make something good to drink, eh? Coffee, tea, hot chocolate, a bit of brandy—"

Rambo was their robot's name. I don't know why except that it starts with R. There's no law about it, but you've probably noticed for yourself that almost every robot has a name beginning with R. R for robot, I suppose. The usual name is Robert. There must be a million robot Roberts in the northeast corridor alone.

And frankly, it's my opinion that's the reason human names just don't start with R any more. You get Bob and Dick but not Robert or Richard. You get Posy and Trudy, but not Rose or Ruth. Sometimes you get unusual R's. I know of three robots called Rutabaga, and two that are

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Rameses. But Hortense is the only one I know who named a robot Rambo, a syllable-combination I've never encountered, and I've never liked to ask why. I was sure the explanation would prove to be unpleasant.

Rambo turned out to be useless at once. He was, of course, programmed for the DeLancey/Hortense menage and that was utterly modern and utterly automated. To prepare drinks in his own home, all Rambo had to do was to press appropriate buttons. (Why anyone would need a robot to press buttons, I would like to have explained to me!)

He said so. He turned to Hortense and said in a voice like honey (it wasn't Rodney's city-boy voice with its trace of Brooklyn), "The equipment is lacking, madam."

And Hortense drew a sharp breath. "You mean you *still* don't have a robotized kitchen, grandfather?" (She called me nothing at all, until LeRoy was born, howling of course, and then she promptly called me "grandfather." Naturally, she never called me Howard. That would tend to show me to be human, or, more unlikely, show *her* to be human.)

I said, "Well, it's robotized when Rodney is in it."

"I dare say," she said. "But we're not living in the twentieth century, grandfather."

I thought: How I wish we were—but I just said, "Well, why not instruct Rambo how to operate the controls. I'm sure he can pour and mix and heat and do whatever else is necessary."

"I'm sure he can," said Hortense, "but thank Fate he doesn't have to. I'm not going to interfere with his programming. It will make him less efficient."

Gracie said, worried, but amiable, "But if we don't interfere with his programming, then I'll just have to instruct him, step by step, but I don't know how it's done. I've never done it."

I said, "Rodney can tell him."

Gracie said, "Oh, Howard, we've given Rodney a vacation."

"I know, but we're not going to ask him to *do* anything; just tell Rambo here what to do and then Rambo can do it."

Whereupon Rambo said stiffly, "Madam, there is nothing in my programming or in my instructions that would make it mandatory for me to accept orders given me by another robot, especially one that is an earlier model."

Hortense said, soothingly, "Of course, Rambo. I'm sure that grandfather and grandmother understand that."(I noticed that DeLancey never said a word. I wonder if he *ever* said a word when his dear wife was present.)

I said, "All right, I tell you what. I'll have Rodney tell *me*, and then I will tell Rambo."

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Rambo said nothing to that. Even Rambo is subject to the second law of robotics which makes it mandatory for him to obey human orders.

Hortense's eyes narrowed and I knew that she would like to tell me that Rambo was far too fine a robot to be ordered about by the likes of me, but some distant and rudimentary near-human waft of feeling kept her from doing so.

Little LeRoy was hampered by no such quasi-human restraints. He said, "I don't want to have to look at Rodney's ugly puss. I bet he don't know how to do *anything* and if he does, ol' Grampa would get it all wrong anyway."

It would have been nice, I thought, if I could be alone with little LeRoy for five minutes and reason calmly with him, with a brick, but a mother's instinct told Hortense never to leave LeRoy alone with any human being whatever.

There was nothing to do, really, but get Rodney out of his niche in the closet where he had been enjoying his own thoughts (I wonder if a robot has his own thoughts when he is alone) and put him to work. It was hard. He would say a phrase, then I would say the same phrase, then Rambo would do something, then Rodney would say another phrase and so on.

It all took twice as long as if Rodney were doing it himself and it wore *me* out, I can tell you, because everything had to be like that, using the dishwasher/sterilizer, cooking the Christmas feast, cleaning up messes on the table or on the floor, everything.

Gracie kept moaning that Rodney's vacation was being ruined, but she never seemed to notice that mine was, too, though I *did* admire Hortense for her manner of saying something unpleasant at every moment that some statement seemed called for. I noticed, particularly, that she never repeated herself once. Anyone can be nasty, but to be unfailingly creative in one's nastiness filled me with a perverse desire to applaud now and then.

But, really, the worst thing of all came on Christmas Eve. The tree had been put up and I was exhausted. We didn't have the kind of situation in which an automated box of ornaments was plugged into an electronic tree, and at the touch of one button there would result an instantaneous and perfect distribution of ornaments. On our tree (of ordinary, old-fashioned plastic) the ornaments had to be placed, one by one, by hand.

Hortense looked revolted; but I said, "Actually, Hortense, this means you can be creative and make your own arrangement."

Hortense sniffed, rather like the scrape of claws on a rough plaster wall, and left the room with an obvious expression of nausea on her face. I bowed in the direction of her retreating back, glad to see her go, and

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then began the tedious task of listening to Rodney's instructions and passing them on to Rambo.

When it was over, I decided to rest my aching feet and mind by sitting in a chair in a far and rather dim corner of the room. I had hardly folded my aching body into the chair when little LeRoy entered. He didn't see me, I suppose, or he might simply have ignored me as being part of the less important and interesting pieces of furniture in the room.

He cast a disdainful look on the tree and said, to Rambo, "Listen, where are the Christmas presents? I'll bet old Gramps and Gram got me lousy ones, but I ain't going to wait for no tomorrow morning."

Rambo said, "I do not know where they are, Little Master."

"Huh!" said LeRoy, turning to Rodney. "How about you, Stink-face. Do you know where the presents are?"

Rodney would have been within the bounds of his programming to have refused to answer on the grounds that he did not know he was being addressed, since his name was Rodney and not Stink-face. I'm quite certain that that would have been Rambo's attitude. Rodney, however, was of different stuff. He answered politely, "Yes, I do, Little Master."

"So where is it, you old puke?"

Rodney said, "I don't think it would be wise to tell you, Little Master. That would disappoint Gracie and Howard who would like to give the presents to you tomorrow morning."

"Listen," said little LeRoy, "who you think you're talking to, you dumb robot? Now I gave you an order. You bring those presents to me." And in an attempt to show Rodney who was master, he kicked the robot in the shin.

It was a mistake. I saw it would be that a second before and that was a joyous second. Little LeRoy, after all, was ready for bed (though I doubted that he ever went to bed before he was *good* and ready). Therefore, he was wearing slippers. What's more, the slipper sailed off the foot with which he kicked, so that he ended by slamming his bare toes hard against the solid chrome-steel of the robotic shin.

He fell to the floor howling and in rushed his mother. "What is it, LeRoy? What is it?"

Whereupon little LeRoy had the immortal gall to say, "He hit me. That old monster-robot *hit* me."

Hortense screamed. She saw me and shouted, "That robot of yours must be destroyed."

I said, "Come, Hortense. A robot can't hit a boy. First law of robotics prevents it."

"It's an *old* robot, a *broken* robot. LeRoy says—"

"LeRoy lies. There is no robot, no matter how old or how broken, who could hit a boy."

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"Then *he* did it. *Grampa* did it," howled LeRoy.

"I wish I did," I said, quietly, "but no robot would have allowed me to. Ask your own. Ask Rambo if he would have remained motionless while either Rodney or I had hit your boy. Rambo!"

I put it in the imperative, and Rambo said, "I would not have allowed any harm to come to the Little Master, Madam, but I did not know what he purposed. He kicked Rodney's shin with his bare foot, Madam."

Hortense gasped and her eyes bulged in fury. "Then he had a good reason to do so. I'll still have your robot destroyed."

"Go ahead, Hortense. Unless you're willing to ruin your robot's efficiency by trying to reprogram him to lie, he will bear witness to just what preceded the kick and so, of course, with pleasure, will I."

Hortense left the next morning, carrying the pale-faced LeRoy with her (it turned out he had broken a toe—nothing he didn't deserve) and an endlessly wordless DeLancey.

Gracie wrung her hands and implored them to stay, but I watched them leave without emotion. No, that's a lie. I watched them leave with lots of emotion, all pleasant.

Later, I said to Rodney, when Gracie was not present, "I'm sorry, Rodney. That was a horrible Christmas, all because we tried to have it without you. We'll never do that again, I promise."

"Thank you, Sir," said Rodney. "I must admit that there were times these two days when I earnestly wished the laws of robotics did not exist."

I grinned and nodded my head, but that night I woke up out of a sound sleep and began to worry. I've been worrying ever since.

I admit that Rodney was greatly tried, but a robot *can't* wish the laws of robotics did not exist. He *can't,* no matter what the circumstances.

If I report this, Rodney will undoubtedly be scrapped, and if we're issued a new robot as recompense, Gracie will simply never forgive me. Never! No robot, however new, however talented, can possibly replace Rodney in her affection.

In fact, I'll never forgive myself. Quite apart from my own liking for Rodney, I couldn't bear to give Hortense the satisfaction.

But if I do nothing, I live with a robot capable of wishing the laws of robotics did not exist. From wishing they did not exist to acting as if they did not exist is just a step. At what moment will he take that step and in what form will he show that he has done so?

What do I do? What do I do? ●

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WILD CHILD

by Judith Moffett

Three dozen children
reft from the wild. Let fact speak: most, though naked
and thin, seem not to feel the cold; most move
abnormally, and swiftest on all fours;
sight, hearing, smell abnormally acute
in some ways, dull in others. All hate clothes.
All would be wild, if they could choose, forever,
are caught with difficulty and run away
time and again. Imagine them. Imagine
lives like theirs: no fiberfill or Vibram
or freeze-dried whatsits, hand-to-mouth in Nature,
free as the deer—the freedom Tarzan knew—
"With the first dizzy swing from tree to tree
all the old joy of living swept over him . . .
Who would go back to the stifling, wicked cities
when the jungle offered peace and liberty?
Not he." Victor of Aveyron showed always
"the same ecstasy at the sight of moonlight
and a snow-covered field, the same transports
of rapture at the sound of a stormy wind,
and passion for the freedom of the open
countryside"; or read of the Gazelle-Boy's
ecstatic cries, dancing the desert sun up—
thus far the fictioneers imagine true.

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But, versed in codes of herd or pack, of speech
the wolf-child grasps no particle and cannot
learn. Kamala's fifty words took nine
years to acquire, Victor knew only three,
though both—like two-year-olds and homegrown chimps—
followed the gist of much of what they heard.

* * *

The wild child rolling naked in the snow
With wordless joy, the tame child with his sled
And snowsuit shouting "Dad, hey, watch me Dad!"—
Each, in his own way blessed, can never know

The other's luck. Words are the price of wildness
That pure, and wildness the fair price of words.
Lord Greystoke speaking in the House of Lords,
Parrying qualms and barbs with courteous mildness,

OR Tarzan sleeping bare-ass in a crotch,
Fat haunch of something bloody in his clutch:

Choose one. Mowgli could not be Mowgli, ever;
The mythic twins could not have founded Rome.
A door seals in the self: nobody home.
Language, like love, comes early or comes never.

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THE LUNATICS

by Kim Stanley Robinson

Kim Stanley Robinson recently pulled off a major coup. Two of his brilliant novellas, "The Blind Geometer" (*IAsfm*, August 1987) and "Mother Goddess of the World" (*IAsfm*, October 1987), were finalists for the 1987 Hugo awards. Another of Mr. Robinson's novellas, "Green Mars" (*IAsfm*, September 1985), was published in October —together with Arthur C. Clarke's "A Mind for Medusa"—as the lead book in Tor's new "Doubles" series.

art: Janet Aulisio

1988 by Kim Stanley Robinson

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They were very near the center of the moon, Jakob told them. He was the newest member of the bullpen, but already their leader.

"How do you know?" Solly challenged him. It was stifling, the hot air thick with the reek of their sweat, and a pungent stink from the waste bucket in the corner. In the pure black, under the blanket of the rock's basalt silence, their shifting and snuffling loomed large, defined the size of the pen. "I suppose you see it with your third eye."

Jakob had a laugh as big as his hands. He was a big man, never a doubt of that. "Of course not, Solly. The third eye is for seeing in the black. It's a natural sense just like the others. It takes all the data from the rest of the senses, and processes them into a visual image transmitted by the third optic nerve, which runs from the forehead to the sight centers at the back of the brain. But you can only focus it by an act of the will—same as with all the other senses. It's not magic. We just never needed it till now."

"So how do you know?"

"It's a problem in spherical geometry, and I solved it. Oliver and I solved it. This big vein of blue runs right down into the core, I believe, down into the moon's molten heart where we can never go. But we'll follow it as far as we can. Note how light we're getting. There's less gravity near the center of things."

"I feel heavier than ever."

"You are heavy, Solly. Heavy with disbelief."

"Where's Freeman?" Hester said in her crow's rasp.

No one replied.

Oliver stirred uneasily over the rough basalt of the pen's floor. First Naomi, then mute Elijah, now Freeman. Somewhere out in the shafts and caverns, tunnels and corridors—somewhere in the dark maze of mines, people were disappearing. Their pen was emptying, it seemed. And the other pens?

"Free at last," Jakob murmured.

"There's something out there," Hester said, fear edging her harsh voice, so that it scraped Oliver's nerves like the screech of an ore car's wheels over a too-sharp bend in the tracks. "Something out there!"

The rumor had spread through the bullpens already, whispered mouth to ear or in huddled groups of bodies. There were thousands of shafts bored through the rock, hundreds of chambers and caverns. Lots of these were closed off, but many more were left open, and there was room to hide—miles and miles of it. First some of their cows had disappeared. Now it was people too. And Oliver had heard a miner jabbering at the low edge of hysteria, about a giant foreman gone mad after an accident took both his arms at the shoulder—the arms had been replaced by

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prostheses, and the foreman had escaped into the black, where he preyed on miners off by themselves, ripping them up, feeding on them—

They all heard the steely squeak of a car's wheel. Up the mother shaft, past cross tunnel Forty; had to be foremen at this time of shift. Would the car turn at the fork to their concourse? Their hypersensitive ears focused on the distant sound; no one breathed. The wheels squeaked, turned their way. Oliver, who was already shivering, began to shake hard.

The car stopped before their pen. The door opened, all in darkness. Not a sound from the quaking miners.

Fierce white light blasted them and they cried out, leaped back against the cage bars vainly. Blinded, Oliver cringed at the clawing of a foreman's hands, searching under his shirt and pants. Through pupils like pinholes he glimpsed brief black-and-white snapshots of gaunt bodies undergoing similar searches, then blows. Shouts, cries of pain, smack of flesh on flesh, an electric buzzing. Shaving their heads, could it be that time again already? He was struck in the stomach, choked around the neck. Hester's long wiry brown arms, wrapped around her head. Scalp burned, *buzzz*, all chopped up. Thrown to the rock.

"Where's the twelfth?" In the foremen's staccato language.

No one answered.

The foremen left, light receding with them until it was black again, the pure dense black that was their own. Except now it was swimming with bright red bars, washing around in painful tears. Oliver's third eye opened a little, which calmed him, because it was still a new experience; he could make out his companions, dim redblack shapes in the black, huddled over themselves, gasping.

Jakob moved among them, checking for hurts, comforting. He cupped Oliver's forehead and Oliver said, "It's seeing already."

"Good work." On his knees Jakob clumped to their shit bucket, took off the lid, reached in. He pulled something out. Oliver marveled at how clearly he was able to see all this. Before, floating blobs of color had drifted in the black; but he had always assumed they were afterimages, or hallucinations. Only with Jakob's instruction had he been able to perceive the patterns they made, the vision that they constituted. It was an act of will. That was the key.

Now, as Jakob cleaned the object with his urine and spit, Oliver found that the eye in his forehead saw even more, in sharp blood etchings. Jakob held the lump overhead, and it seemed it was a little lamp, pouring light over them in a wavelength they had always been able to see, but had never needed before. By its faint ghostly radiance the whole pen was made clear, a structure etched in blood, redblack on black. "Promethium," Jakob breathed. The miners crowded around him, faces lifted to it. Solly

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had a little pug nose, and squinched his face terribly in the effort to focus. Hester had a face to go with her voice, stark bones under skin scored with lines. "The most precious element. On Earth our masters rule by it. All their civilization is based on it, on the movement inside it, electrons escaping their shells and crashing into neutrons, giving off heat and more blue as well. So they condemn us to a life of pulling it out of the moon for them."

He chipped at the chunk with a thumbnail. They all knew precisely its clayey texture, its heaviness, the dull silvery gray of it, which pulsed green under some lasers, blue under others. Jakob gave each of them a sliver of it. "Take it between two molars and crush hard. Then swallow."

"It's poison, isn't it?" said Solly.

"After years and years." The big laugh, filling the black. "We don't have years and years, you know that. And in the short run it helps your vision in the black. It strengthens the will."

Oliver put the soft heavy sliver between his teeth, chomped down, felt the metallic jolt, swallowed. It throbbed in him. He could see the others' faces, the mesh of the pen walls, the pens farther down the concourse, the robot tracks—all in the lightless black.

"Promethium is the moon's living substance," Jakob said quietly. "We walk in the nerves of the moon, tearing them out under the lash of the foremen. The shafts are a map of where the neurons used to be. As they drag the moon's mind out by its roots, to take it back to Earth and use it for their own enrichment, the lunar consciousness fills us and we become its mind ourselves, to save it from extinction."

They joined hands: Solly, Hester, Jakob, and Oliver. The surge of energy passed through them, leaving a sweet afterglow.

Then they lay down on their rock bed, and Jakob told them tales of his home, of the Pacific dockyards, of the cliffs and wind and waves, and the way the sun's light lay on it all. Of the jazz in the bars, and how trumpet and clarinet could cross each other. "How do you remember?" Solly asked plaintively. "They burned me blank."

Jakob laughed hard. "I fell on my mother's knitting needles when I was a boy, and one went right up my nose. Chopped the hippocampus in two. So all my life my brain has been storing what memories it can somewhere else. They burned a dead part of me, and left the living memory intact."

"Did it hurt?" Hester croaked.

"The needles? You bet. A flash like the foremen's prods, right there in the center of me. I suppose the moon feels the same pain, when we mine her. But I'm grateful now, because it opened my third eye right at that moment. Ever since then I've seen with it. And down here, without our third eye it's nothing but the black."

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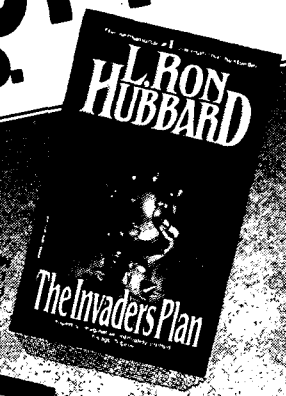

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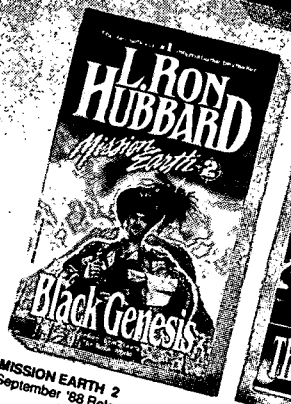

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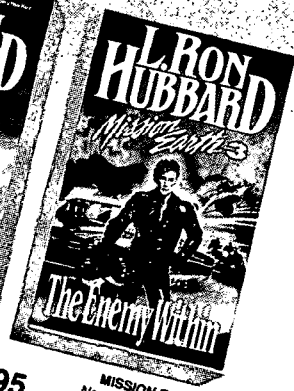

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Oliver nodded, remembering.
"And something out there," croaked Hester.

Next shift start Oliver was keyed by a foreman, then made his way through the dark to the end of the long, slender vein of blue he was working. Oliver was a tall youth, and some of the shaft was low; no time had been wasted smoothing out the vein's irregular shape. He had to crawl between the narrow tracks bolted to the rocky uneven floor, scraping through some gaps as if working through a great twisted intestine.

At the shaft head he turned on the robot, a long low-slung metal box on wheels. He activated the laser drill, which faintly lit the exposed surface of the blue, blinding him for some time. When he regained a certain visual equilibrium—mostly by ignoring the weird illumination of the drill beam—he typed instructions into the robot, and went to work drilling into the face, then guiding the robot's scoop and hoist to the broken pieces of blue. When the big chunks were in the ore cars behind the robot, he jackhammered loose any fragments of the ore that adhered to the basalt walls, and added them to the cars before sending them off.

This vein was tapering down, becoming a mere tendril in the lunar body, and there was less and less room to work in. Soon the robot would be too big for the shaft, and they would have to bore through basalt; they would follow the tendril to its very end, hoping for a bole or a fan.

At first Oliver didn't much mind the shift's work. But IR-directed cameras on the robot surveyed him as well as the shaft face, and occasional shocks from its prod reminded him to keep hustling. And in the heat and bad air, as he grew ever more famished, it soon enough became the usual desperate, painful struggle to keep to the required pace.

Time disappeared into that zone of endless agony that was the latter part of a shift. Then he heard the distant klaxon of shift's end, echoing down the shaft like a cry in a dream. He turned the key in the robot and was plunged into noiseless black, the pure absolute of Nonbeing. Too tired to try opening his third eye, Oliver started back up the shaft by feel, following the last ore car of the shift. It rolled quickly ahead of him and was gone.

In the new silence distant mechanical noises were like creaks in the rock. He measured out the shift's work, having marked its beginning on the shaft floor: eighty-nine lengths of his body. Average.

It took a long time to get back to the junction with the shaft above his. Here there was a confluence of veins and the room opened out, into an odd chamber some seven feet high, but wider than Oliver could determine in every direction. When he snapped his fingers there was no rebound at all. The usual light at the far end of the low chamber was absent. Feeling sandwiched between two endless rough planes of rock, Oliver

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experienced a sudden claustrophobia; there was a whole world overhead, he was buried alive. . . . He crouched and every few steps tapped one rail with his ankle, navigating blindly, a hand held forward to discover any dips in the ceiling.

He was somewhere in the middle of this space when he heard a noise behind him. He froze. Air pushed at his face. It was completely dark, completely silent. The noise squeaked behind him again: a sound like a fingernail, brushed along the banded metal of piano wire. It ran right up his spine, and he felt the hair on his forearms pull away from the dried sweat and stick straight out. He was holding his breath. Very slow footsteps were placed softly behind him, perhaps forty feet away . . . an airy snuffle, like a big nostril sniffing. For the footsteps to be so spaced out it would have to be . . .

Oliver loosened his joints, held one arm out and the other forward, tiptoed away from the rail, at right angles to it, for twelve feathery steps. In the lunar gravity he felt he might even float. Then he sank to his knees, breathed through his nose as slowly as he could stand to. His heart knocked at the back of his throat, he was sure it was louder than his breath by far. Over that noise and the roar of blood in his ears he concentrated his hearing to the utmost pitch. Now he could hear the faint sounds of ore cars and perhaps miners and foremen, far down the tunnel that led from the far side of this chamber back to the pens. Even as faint as they were, they obscured further his chances of hearing whatever it was in the cavern with him.

The footsteps had stopped. Then came another metallic *scrick* over the rail, heard against a light sniff. Oliver cowered, held his arms hard against his sides, knowing he smelled of sweat and fear. Far down the distant shaft a foreman spoke sharply. If he could reach that voice . . . he resisted the urge to run for it, feeling sure somehow that whatever was in there with him was fast.

Another *scrick*. Oliver cringed, trying to reduce his echo profile. There was a chip of rock under his hand. He fingered it, hand shaking. His forehead throbbed and he understood it was his third eye, straining to pierce the black silence and *see* . . .

A shape with pillar-thick legs, all in blocks of redblack. It was some sort of . . .

Scrick. Sniff. It was turning his way. A flick of the wrist, the chip of rock skittered, hitting ceiling and then floor, back in the direction he had come from.

Very slow soft footsteps, as if the legs were somehow . . . they were coming in his direction.

He straightened and reached above him, hands scrabbling over the rough basalt. He felt a deep groove in the rock, and next to it a vertical

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hole. He jammed a hand in the hole, made a fist; put the fingers of the other hand along the side of the groove, and pulled himself up. The toes of his boot fit the groove, and he flattened up against the ceiling. In the lunar gravity he could stay there forever. Holding his breath.

Step . . . step . . . snuffle, fairly near the floor, which had given him the idea for this move. He couldn't turn to look. He felt something scrape the hip pocket of his pants and thought he was dead, but fear kept him frozen; and the sounds moved off into the distance of the vast chamber, without a pause.

He dropped to the ground and bolted doubled over for the far tunnel, which loomed before him redblack in the black, exuding air and faint noise. He plunged right in it, feeling one wall nick a knuckle. He took the sharp right he knew was there and threw himself down to the intersection of floor and wall. Footsteps padded by him, apparently running on the rails.

When he couldn't hold his breath any longer he breathed. Three or four minutes passed and he couldn't bear to stay still. He hurried to the intersection, turned left and slunk to the bullpen. At the check point the monitor's horn squawked and a foreman blasted him with a searchlight, pawed him roughly. "Hey!" The foreman held a big chunk of blue, taken from Oliver's hip pocket. What was this?

"Sorry, boss," Oliver said jerkily, trying to see it properly, remembering the thing brushing him as it passed under. "Must've fallen in." He ignored the foreman's curse and blow, and fell into the pen tearful with the pain of the light, with relief at being back among the others. Every muscle in him was shaking.

But Hester never came back from that shift.

Sometime later the foremen came back into their bullpen, wielding the lights and the prods to line them up against one mesh wall. Through pinprick pupils Oliver saw just the grossest slabs of shapes, all grainy black-and-gray: Jakob was a big stout man, with a short black beard under the shaved head, and eyes that popped out, glittering even in Oliver's silhouette world.

"Miners are disappearing from your pen," the foreman said, in the miner's language. His voice was like the quartz they tunneled through occasionally: hard, and sparkly with cracks and stresses, as if it might break at any moment into a laugh or a scream.

No one answered.

Finally Jakob said, "We know."

The foreman stood before him. "They started disappearing when you arrived."

Jakob shrugged. "Not what I hear."

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The foreman's searchlight was right on Jakob's face, which stood out brilliantly, as if two of the searchlights were pointed at each other. Oliver's third eye suddenly opened and gave the face substance: brown skin, heavy brows, scarred scalp. Not at all the white cut-out blazing from the black shadows. "You'd better be careful, miner."

Loudly enough to be heard from neighboring pens, Jakob said, "Not my fault if something out there is eating us, boss."

The foreman struck him. Lights bounced and they all dropped to the floor for protection, presenting their backs to the boots. Rain of blows, pain of blows. Still, several pens had to have heard him.

Foremen gone. White blindness returned to black blindness, to the death velvet of their pure darkness. For a long time they lay in their own private worlds, hugging the warm rock of the floor, feeling the bruises blush. Then Jakob crawled around and squatted by each of them, placing his hands on their foreheads. "Oh yeah," he would say. "You're okay. Wake up now. Look around you." And in the afterblack they stretched and stretched, quivering like dogs on a scent. The bulks in the black, the shapes they made as they moved and groaned . . . yes, it came to Oliver again, and he rubbed his face and looked around, eyes shut to help him see. "I ran into it on the way back in," he said.

They all went still. He told them what had happened.

"The blue in your pocket?"

They considered his story in silence. No one understood it.

No one spoke of Hester. Oliver found he couldn't. She had been his friend. To live without that gaunt crow's voice . . .

Some time later the side door slid up, and they hurried into the barn to eat. The chickens squawked as they took the eggs, the cows mooed as they milked them. The stove plates turned the slightest bit luminous—redblack, again—and by their light his three eyes saw all. Solly cracked and fried eggs. Oliver went to work on his vats of cheese, pulled out a round of it that was ready. Jakob sat at the rear of one cow and laughed as it turned to butt his knee. Splish splish! Splish splish! When he was done he picked up the cow and put it down in front of its hay, where it chomped happily. Animal stink of them all, the many fine smells of food cutting through it. Jakob laughed at his cow, which butted his knee again as if objecting to the ridicule. "Little pig of a cow, little piglet. Mexican cows. They bred for this size, you know. On Earth the ordinary cow is as tall as Oliver, and about as big as this whole pen."

They laughed at the idea, not believing him. The buzzer cut them off, and the meal was over. Back into their pen, to lay their bodies down.

Still no talk of Hester, and Oliver found his skin crawling again as he recalled his encounter with whatever it was that sniffed through the mines. Jakob came over and asked him about it, sounding puzzled. Then

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he handed Oliver a rock. "Imagine this is a perfect sphere, like a baseball."

"Baseball?"

"Like a ball bearing, perfectly round and smooth, you know."

Ah yes. Spherical geometry again. Trigonometry too. Oliver groaned, resisting the work. Then Jakob got him interested despite himself, in the intricacy of it all, the way it all fell together in a complex but comprehensible pattern. Sine and cosine, so clear! And the clearer it got the more he could see: the mesh of the bullpen, the network of shafts and tunnels and caverns piercing the jumbled fabric of the moon's body . . . all clear lines of redblack on black, like the metal of the stove plate as it just came visible, and all from Jakob's clear, patiently fingered, perfectly balanced equations. He could see through rock.

"Good work," Jakob said when Oliver got tired. They lay there among the others, shifting around to find hollows for their hips.

Silence of the off shift. Muffled clanks downshaft, floor trembling at a detonation miles of rock away; ears popped as air smashed into the dead end of their tunnel, compressed to something nearly liquid for just an instant. Must have been a Boesman. Ringing silence again.

"So what is it, Jakob?" Solly asked when they could hear each other again.

"It's an element," Jakob said sleepily. "A strange kind of element, nothing else like it. Promethium. Number 61 on the periodic table. A rare earth, a lanthanide, an inner transition metal. We're finding it in veins of an ore called monazite, and in pure grains and nuggets scattered in the ore."

Impatient, almost pleading: "But what makes it so special?"

For a long time Jakob didn't answer. They could hear him thinking. Then he said, "Atoms have a nucleus, made of protons and neutrons bound together. Around this nucleus shells of electrons spin, and each shell is either full or trying to get full, to balance with the number of protons—to balance the positive and negative charges. An atom is like a human heart, you see.

"Now promethium is radioactive, which means it's out of balance, and parts of it are breaking free. But promethium never reaches its balance, because it radiates in a manner that increases its instability rather than the reverse. Promethium atoms release energy in the form of positrons, flying free when neutrons are hit by electrons. But during that impact more neutrons appear in the nucleus. Seems they're coming from nowhere. Some people say that they're little white holes, every single atom of them. Burning forever at nine hundred and forty curies per gram. So each atom of the blue is a power loop in itself, giving off energy perpet-

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ually. Bringing energy into our universe from somewhere else. Little gateways."

Solly's sigh filled the black, expressing incomprehension for all of them. "So it's poisonous?"

"It's dangerous, sure, because the positrons breaking away from it fly right through flesh like ours. Mostly they never touch a thing in us, because that's how close to phantoms we are—mostly blood, which is almost light. That's why we can see each other so well. But sometimes a beta particle will hit something small on its way through. Could mean nothing or it could kill you on the spot. Eventually it'll get us all."

Oliver fell asleep dreaming of threads of light like concentrations of the foremen's fierce flashes, passing right through him. Shifts passed in their timeless round. They ached when they woke on the warm basalt floor, they ached when they finished the long work shifts. They were hungry and often injured. None of them could say how long they had been there. None of them could say how old they were. Sometimes they lived without light other than the robots' lasers and the stove plates. Sometimes the foremen visited with their scorching lighthouse beams every off shift, shouting questions and beating them. Apparently cows were disappearing, cylinders of air and oxygen, supplies of all sorts. None of it mattered to Oliver but the spherical geometry. He knew where he was, he could see it. The three dimensional map in his head grew more extensive every shift. But everything else was fading away. . . .

"So it's the most powerful substance in the world," Solly said. "But why us? Why are we here?"

"You don't know?" Jakob said.

"They blanked us, remember? All that's gone."

But because of Jakob, they knew what was up there: the domed palaces on the lunar surface, the fantastic luxuries of Earth . . . when he spoke of it, in fact, a lot of Earth came back to them, and they babbled and chattered at the unexpected upwellings. Memories that deep couldn't be blanked without killing, Jakob said. And so they prevailed after all, in a way.

But there was much that had been burnt forever. And so Jakob sighed. "Yeah, yeah, I remember. I just thought—well. We're here for different reasons. Some were criminals. Some complained."

"Like Hester!" They laughed.

"Yeah, I suppose that's what got her here. But a lot of us were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Wrong politics or skin or whatever. Wrong look on your face."

"That was me, I bet," Solly said, and the others laughed at him. "Well, I got a funny face, I know I do! I can feel it."

Jakob was silent for a long time. "What about you?" Oliver asked.

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More silence. The rumble of a distant detonation, like muted thunder.

"I wish I knew. But I'm like you in that. I don't remember the actual arrest. They must have hit me on the head. Given me a concussion. I must have said something against the mines, I guess. And the wrong people heard me."

"Bad luck."

"Yeah. Bad luck."

More shifts passed. Oliver rigged a timepiece with two rocks, a length of detonation cord and a set of pulleys, and confirmed over time what he had come to suspect; the work shifts were getting longer. It was more and more difficult to get all the way through one, harder to stay awake for the meals and the geometry lessons during the off-shifts. The foremen came every off-shift now, blasting in with their searchlights and shouts and kicks, leaving in a swirl of afterimages and pain. Solly went out one shift cursing them under his breath, and never came back. Disappeared. The foremen beat them for it and Oliver shouted with rage, "It's not our fault! There's something out there, I saw it! It's killing us!"

Then next shift his little tendril of a vein bloomed, he couldn't find any rock around the blue: a big bole. He would have to tell the foremen, start working in a crew. He dismantled his clock.

On the way back he heard the footsteps again, shuffling along slowly behind him. This time he was at the entrance to the last tunnel, the pens close behind him. He turned to stare into the darkness with his third eye, willing himself to see the thing. Whoosh of air, a sniff, a footfall on the rail . . . far across the thin wedge of air a beam of light flashed, making a long narrow cone of white talc. Steel tracks gleamed where the wheels of the car burnished them. Pupils shrinking like a snail's antennae, he stared back at the footsteps, saw nothing. Then, just barely, two points of red: retinas, reflecting the distant lance of light. They blinked. He bolted and ran again, reached the foremen at the checkpoint in seconds. They blinded him as he panted, passed him through and into the bullpen.

After the meal on that shift Oliver lay trembling on the floor of the bullpen and told Jakob about it. "I'm scared, Jakob. Solly, Hester, Freeman, mute Lije, Naomi—they're all gone. Everyone I know here is gone but us."

"Free at last," Jakob said shortly. "Here, let's do your problems for tonight."

"I don't care about them."

"You have to care about them. Nothing matters unless you do. That blue is the mind of the moon being torn away, and the moon knows it. If we learn what the network says in its shapes, then the moon knows that too, and we're suffered to live."

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"Not if that thing finds us!"

"You don't know. Anyway nothing to be done about it. Come on, let's do the lesson. We need it."

So they worked on equations in the dark. Both were distracted and the work went slowly; they fell asleep in the middle of it, right there on their faces.

Shifts passed. Oliver pulled a muscle in his back, and excavating the bole he had found was an agony of discomfort. When the bole was cleared it left a space like the interior of an egg, ivory and black and quite smooth, punctuated only by the bluish spots of other tendrils of monazite extending away through the basalt. They left a catwalk across the central space, with decks cut into the rock on each side, and ramps leading to each of the veins of blue; and began drilling on their own again, one man and robot team to each vein. At each shift's end Oliver rushed to get to the egg-chamber at the same time as all the others, so that he could return the rest of the way to the bullpen in a crowd. This worked well until one shift came to an end with the hoist chock full of the ore. It took him some time to dump it into the ore car and shut down.

So he had to cross the catwalk alone, and he would be alone all the way back to the pens. Surely it was past time to move the pens closer to the shaft heads! He didn't want to do this. . . .

Halfway across the catwalk he heard a faint noise ahead of him. *Scrick; scriiiiiick.* He jerked to a stop, held the rail hard. Couldn't reach the ceiling here. Back stabbing its protest, he started to climb over the railing. He could hang from the underside.

He was right on the top of the railing when he was seized up by a number of strong cold hands. He opened his mouth to scream and his mouth was filled with wet clay. The blue. His head was held steady and his ears filled with the same stuff, so that the sounds of his own terrified sharp nasal exhalations were suddenly cut off. Promethium; it would kill him. It hurt his back to struggle on. He was being carried horizontally, ankles whipped, arms tied against his body. Then plugs of the clay were shoved up his nose and in the middle of a final paroxysm of resistance his mind fell away into the black.

The lowest whisper in the world said, "Oliver Pen Twelve." He heard the voice with his stomach. He was astonished to be alive.

"You will never be given anything again. Do you accept the charge?"

He struggled to nod. I never wanted anything! he tried to say. I only wanted a life like anyone else.

"You will have to fight for every scrap of food, every swallow of water, every breath of air. Do you accept the charge?"

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I accept the charge. I welcome it.

"In the eternal night you will steal from the foremen, kill the foremen, oppose their work in every way. Do you accept the charge?"

I welcome it.

"You will live free in the mind of the moon. Will you take up this charge?"

He sat up. His mouth was clear, filled only with the sharp electric aftertaste of the blue. He saw the shapes around him: there were five of them, five people there. And suddenly he understood. Joy ballooned in him and he said, "I will. Oh, I will!"

A light appeared. Accustomed as he was either to no light or to intense blasts of it, Oliver at first didn't comprehend. He thought his third eye was rapidly gaining power. As perhaps it was. But there was also a laser drill from one of the A robots, shot at low power through a cylindrical ceramic electronic element, in a way that made the cylinder glow yellow. Blind like a fish, open-mouthed, weak eyes gaping and watering floods, he saw around him Solly, Hester, Freeman, mute Elijah, Naomi. "Yes," he said, and tried to embrace them all at once. "Oh, yes."

They were in one of the long abandoned caverns, a flat-bottomed bole with only three tendrils extending away from it. The chamber was filled with objects Oliver was more used to identifying by feel or sound or smell: pens of cows and hens, a stack of air cylinders and suits, three ore cars, two B robots, an A robot, a pile of tracks and miscellaneous gear. He walked through it all slowly, Hester at his side. She was gaunt as ever, her skin as dark as the shadows; it sucked up the weak light from the ceramic tube and gave it back only in little points and lines. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It was the same for all of us. This is the way."

"And Naomi?"

"The same for her too; but when she agreed to it, she found herself alone."

Then it was Jakob, he thought suddenly. "Where's Jakob?"

Rasped: "He's coming, we think."

Oliver nodded, thought about it. "Was it you, then, following me those times? Why didn't you speak?"

"That wasn't us," Hester said when he explained what had happened. She cawed a laugh. "That was something else, still out there. . . ."

Then Jakob stood before them, making them both jump. They shouted and the others all came running, pressed into a mass together. Jakob laughed. "All here now," he said. "Turn that light off. We don't need it."

And they didn't. Laser shut down, ceramic cooled, they could still see: they could see right into each other, red shapes in the black, radiating joy. Everything in the little chamber was quite distinct, quite *visible*.

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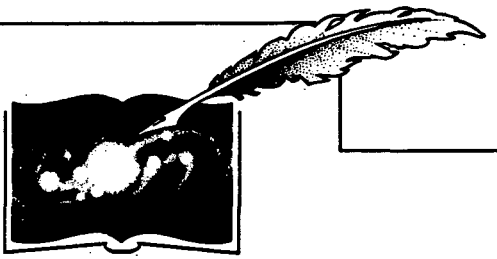

Algis Budrys on
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The Writers of The Future Contest has been extended to September 30, 1988. It's still growing.

WOTF has become a landmark feature of the SF (Speculative Fiction) scene. As founded and planned by L. Ron Hubbard, entry in the Contest is free. It's limited to new authors of science fiction or fantasy who have professionally published no more than three short stories or one novelette. Every three months, a panel of distinguished SF writers names the top three finishers for outright cash grants of $1000, $750 and $500, respectively.

The monetary prizes are delivered shortly after the winners are notified. They are also symbolized by elegant trophies or certificates. Those are presented at the annual Awards Celebration. The recipients are brought to that event as the guests of WOTF. At the Awards, one of the year's four quarterly First Prize winners is announced as recipient of the L. Ron Hubbard Gold Award to The Author of the Writers of The Future Story of The Year, with its impressive trophy and an outright cash grant of an additional $4,000.

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Please send a stamped self-addressed return envelope of the appropriate size with your manuscript or rules-request.

— Algis Budrys

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"We are the mind of the moon."

Without shifts to mark the passage of time Oliver found he could not judge it at all. They worked hard, and they were constantly on the move: always up, through level after level of the mine. "Like shells of the atom, and we're that particle, busted loose and on its way out." They ate when they were famished, slept when they had to. Most of the time they worked, either bringing down shafts behind them, or dismantling depots and stealing everything Jakob designated theirs. A few times they ambushed gangs of foremen, killing them with laser cutters and stripping them of valuables; but on Jakob's orders they avoided contact with foremen when they could. He wanted only material. After a long time—twenty sleeps at least—they had six ore cars of it, all trailing an A robot up long abandoned and empty shafts, where they had to lay the track ahead of them and pull it out behind, as fast as they could move. Among other items Jakob had an insatiable hunger for explosives; he couldn't get enough of them.

It got harder to avoid the foremen, who were now heavily armed, and on their guard. Perhaps even searching for them, it was hard to tell. But they searched with their lighthouse beams on full power, to stay out of ambush: it was easy to see them at a distance, draw them off, lose them in dead ends, detonate mines under them. All the while the little band moved up, rising by infinitely long detours toward the front side of the moon. The rock around them cooled. The air circulated more strongly, until it was a constant wind. Through the seismometers they could hear from far below the rumbling of cars, heavy machinery, detonations. "Oh they're after us all right," Jakob said. "They're running scared."

He was happy with the booty they had accumulated, which included a great number of cylinders of compressed air and pure oxygen. Also vacuum suits for all of them, and a lot more explosives, including ten Boesmans, which were much too big for any ordinary mining. "We're getting close," Jakob said as they ate and drank, then tended the cows and hens. As they lay down to sleep by the cars he would talk to them about their work. Each of them had various jobs: mute Elijah was in charge of their supplies, Solly of the robot, Hester of the seismography. Naomi and Freeman were learning demolition, and were in some undefined sense Jakob's lieutenants. Oliver kept working at his navigation. They had found charts of the tunnel systems in their area, and Oliver was memorizing them, so that he would know at each moment exactly where they were. He found he could do it remarkably well; each time they ventured on he knew where the forks would come, where they would lead. Always upward.

But the pursuit was getting hotter. It seemed there were foremen

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everywhere, patrolling the shafts in search of them. "Soon they'll mine some passages and try to drive us into them," Jakob said. "It's about time we left."

"Left?" Oliver repeated.

"Left the system. Struck out on our own."

"Dig our own tunnel," Naomi said happily.

"Yes."

"To where?" Hester croaked.

Then they were rocked by an explosion that almost broke their eardrums, and the air rushed away. The rock around them trembled, creaked, groaned, cracked, and down the tunnel the ceiling collapsed, shoving dust towards them in a roaring *whoosh*! "A Boesman!" Solly cried.

Jakob laughed out loud. They were all scrambling into their vacuum suits as fast as they could. "Time to leave!" he cried, maneuvering their A robot against the side of the chamber. He put one of their Boesmans against the wall and set the timer. "Okay," he said over the suit's intercom. "Now we got to mine like we never mined before. To the surface!"

The first task was to get far enough away from the Boesman that they wouldn't be killed when it went off. They were now drilling a narrow tunnel and moving the loosened rock behind them to fill up the hole as they passed through it; this loose fill would fly like bullets down a rifle barrel when the Boesman went off. So they made three abrupt turns at acute angles to stop the fill's movement, and then drilled away from the area as fast as they could. Naomi and Jakob were confident that the explosion of the Boesman would shatter the surrounding rock to such an extent that it would never be possible for anyone to locate the starting point for their tunnel.

"Hopefully they'll think we did ourselves in," Naomi said, "either on purpose or by accident." Oliver enjoyed hearing her light laugh, her clear voice that was so pure and musical compared to Hester's croaking. He had never known Naomi well before, but now he admired her grace and power, her pulsing energy; she worked harder than Jakob, even. Harder than any of them.

A few shifts into their new life Naomi checked the detonator timer she kept on a cord around her neck. "It should be going off soon. Someone go try and keep the cows and chickens calmed down." But Solly had just reached the cows' pen when the Boesman went off. They were all sledgehammered by the blast, which was louder than a mere explosion, something more basic and fundamental: the violent smash of a whole world shutting the door on them. Deafened, bruised, they staggered up and checked each other for serious injuries, then pacified the cows, whose

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terrified moos they felt in their hands rather than actually heard. The structural integrity of their tunnel seemed okay; they were in an old flow of the mantle's convection current, now cooled to stasis, and it was plastic enough to take such a blast without shattering. Perfect miner's rock, protecting them like a mother. They lifted up the cows and set them upright on the bottom of the ore car that had been made into the barn. Freeman hurried back down the tunnel to see how the rear of it looked. When he came back their hearing was returning, and through the ringing that would persist for several shifts he shouted, "It's walled off good! Fused!"

So they were in a little tunnel of their own. They fell together in a clump, hugging each other and shouting. "Free at last!" Jakob roared, booming out a laugh louder than anything Oliver had ever heard from him. Then they settled down to the task of turning on an air cylinder and recycler, and regulating their gas exchange.

They soon settled into a routine that moved their tunnel forward as quickly and quietly as possible. One of them operated the robot, digging as narrow a shaft as they could possibly work in. This person used only laser drills unless confronted with extremely hard rock, when it was judged worth the risk to set off small explosions, timed by seismometer to follow closely other detonations back in the mines; Jakob and Naomi hoped that the complex interior of the moon would prevent any listeners from noticing that their explosion was anything more than an echo of the mining blast.

Three of them dealt with the rock freed by the robot's drilling, moving it from the front of the tunnel to its rear, and at intervals pulling up the cars' tracks and bringing them forward. The placement of the loose rock was a serious matter, because if it displaced much more volume than it had at the front of the tunnel, they would eventually fill in all the open space they had; this was the classic problem of the "creeping worm" tunnel. It was necessary to pack the blocks into the space at the rear with an absolute minimum of gaps, in exactly the way they had been cut, like pieces of a puzzle; they all got very good at the craft of this, losing only a few inches of open space in every mile they dug. This work was the hardest both physically and mentally, and each shift of it left Oliver more tired than he had ever been while mining. Because the truth was all of them were working at full speed, and for the middle team it meant almost running, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. . . . Their little bit of open tunnel was only some sixty yards long, but after a while on the midshift it seemed like five hundred.

The three people not working on the rock tended the air and the livestock, ate, helped out with large blocks and the like, and snatched some

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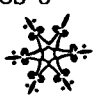

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sleep. They rotated one at a time through the three stations, and worked one shift (timed by detonator timer) at each post. It made for a routine so mesmerizing in its exhaustiveness that Oliver found it very hard to do his calculations of their position in his shift off. "You've got to keep at it," Jakob told him as he ran back from the robot to help with the calculating. "It's not just anywhere we want to come up, but right under the domed city of Selene, next to the rocket rails. To do that we'll need some good navigation. We get that and we'll come up right in the middle of the masters who have gotten rich from selling the blue to Earth, and that will be a very gratifying thing I assure you."

So Oliver would work on it until he slept. Actually it was relatively easy; he knew where they had been in the moon when they struck out on their own, and Jakob had given him the surface co-ordinates for Selene: so it was just a matter of dead reckoning.

It was even possible to calculate their average speed, and therefore when they could expect to reach the surface. That could be checked against the rate of depletion of their fixed resources—air, water lost in the recycler, and food for the livestock. It took a few shifts of consultation with mute Elijah to determine all the factors reliably, and after that it was a simple matter of arithmetic.

When Oliver and Elijah completed these calculations they called Jakob over and explained what they had done.

"Good work," Jakob said. "I should have thought of that."

"But look," Oliver said, "we've got enough air and water, and the robot's power pack is ten times what we'll need—same with explosives—it's only food is a problem. I don't know if we've got enough hay for the cows."

Jakob nodded as he looked over Oliver's shoulder and examined their figures. "We'll have to kill and eat the cows one by one. That'll feed us and cut down on the amount of hay we need, at the same time."

"Eat the cows?" Oliver was stunned.

"Sure! They're meat! People on Earth eat them all the time!"

"Well . . ." Oliver was doubtful, but under the lash of Hester's bitter laughter he didn't say any more.

Still, Jakob and Freeman and Naomi decided it would be best if they stepped up the pace a little bit, to provide them with more of a margin for error. They shifted two people to the shaft face and supplemented the robot's continuous drilling with hand drill work around the sides of the tunnel, and ate on the run while moving blocks to the back, and slept as little as they could. They were making miles on every shift.

The rock they wormed through began to change in character. The hard, dark, unbroken basalt gave way to lighter rock that was sometimes dangerously fractured. "Anorthosite," Jakob said. "We're reaching the

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crust." After that every shift brought them through a new zone of rock. Once they tunneled through great layers of calcium feldspar striped with basalt intrusions, so that it looked like badly made brick. Another time they blasted their way through a wall of jasper as hard as steel. Only once did they pass through a vein of the blue; when they did it occurred to Oliver that his whole conception of the moon's composition had been warped by their mining. He had thought the moon was bursting with promethium, but as they dug across the narrow vein he realized it was uncommon, a loose net of threads in the great lunar body.

As they left the vein behind Solly picked up a piece of the ore and stared at it curiously, lower eyes shut, face contorted as he struggled to focus his third eye. Suddenly he dashed the chunk to the ground, turned and marched to the head of their tunnel, attacked it with a drill. "I've given my whole life to the blue," he said, voice thick. "And what is it but a God-damned rock."

Jakob laughed shortly. They tunneled on, away from the precious metal that now represented to them only a softer material to dig through. "Pick up the pace!" Jakob cried, slapping Solly on the back and leaping over the blocks beside the robot. "This rock has melted and melted again, changing over eons to the stones we see. Metamorphosis," he chanted, stretching the word out, lingering on the syllable *mor* until the word became a kind of song. "Meta*mor*phosis. Meta-*mor*-pho-sis." Naomi and Hester took up the chant, and mute Elijah tapped his drill against the robot in double time. Jakob chanted over it. "Soon we will come to the city of the masters, the domes of Xanadu with their glass and fruit and steaming pools, and their vases and sports and their fine aged wines. And then there will be a—"

"Meta*mor*phosis."

And they tunneled ever faster.

Sitting in the sleeping car, chewing on some cheese, Oliver regarded the bulk of Jakob lying beside him. Jakob breathed deeply, very tired, almost asleep. "How do you know about the domes?" Oliver asked him softly. "How do you know all the things that you know?"

"Don't know," Jakob muttered. "Everyone knows. Less they burn your brain. Put you in a hole to live out your life. I don't know much, boy. Make most of it up. Love of a moon. Whatever we need . . ." and he slept.

They came up through a layer of marble—white marble all laced with quartz, so that it gleamed and sparkled in their lightless sight, and made them feel as though they dug through stone made of their cows' good milk, mixed with water like diamonds. This went on for a long time, until it filled them up and they became intoxicated with its smooth

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muscly texture, with the sparks of light lazing out of it. "I remember once we went to see a jazz band," Jakob said to all of them. Puffing as he ran the white rock along the cars to the rear, stacked it ever so carefully. "It was in Richmond among all the docks and refineries and giant oil tanks and we were so drunk we kept getting lost. But finally we found it—huh!—and it was just this broken down trumpeter and a back line. He played sitting in a chair and you could just see in his face that his life had been a tough scuffle. His hat covered his whole household. And trumpet is a young man's instrument, too, it tears your lip to tatters. So we sat down to drink not expecting a thing, and they started up the last song of a set. 'Bucket's Got a Hole In It.' Four bar blues, as simple as a song can get."

"Meta*mor*phosis," rasped Hester.

"Yeah! Like that. And this trumpeter started to play it. And they went through it over and over and over. Huh! They must have done it a hundred times. Two hundred times. And sure enough this trumpeter was playing low and half the time in his hat, using all the tricks a broken-down trumpeter uses to save his lip, to hide the fact that it went west thirty years before. But after a while that didn't matter, because he was playing. He was playing! Everything he had learned in all his life, all the music and all the sorry rest of it, all that was jammed into the poor old 'Bucket' and by God it was mind over matter time, because that old song began to *roll*." And still on the run he broke into it:

"Oh the buck-et's got a hole in it— Yeah the buck-et's got a hole in it—

Say the buck-et's got a hole in it— Can't buy no beer!"

And over again. Oliver, Solly, Freeman, Hester, Naomi—they couldn't help laughing. What Jakob came up with out of his unburnt past! Mute Elijah banged a car wall happily, then squeezed the udder of a cow between one verse and the next—"Can't buy, no beer!—*Moo*!"

They all joined in, breathing or singing it. It fit the pace of their work perfectly: fast but not too fast, regular, repetitive, simple, endless. All the syllables got the same length, a bit syncopated, except "hole," which was stretched out, and "can't buy no beer," which was high and all stretched out, stretched into a great shout of triumph, which was crazy since what it was saying was bad news, or should have been. But the song made it a cry of joy, and every time it rolled around they sang it louder, more stretched out. Jakob scatted up and down and around the

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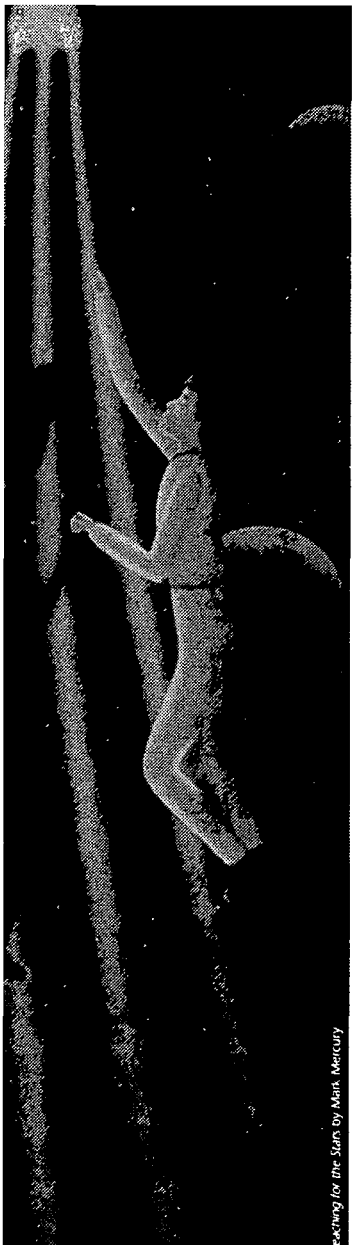

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tune, and Hester found all kinds of higher harmonics in a voice like a saw cutting steel, and the old tune rocked over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over, in a great passacaglia, in the crucible where all poverty is wrenched to delight: the blues. Meta*mor*phosis. They sang it continuously for two shifts running, until they were all completely hypnotized by it; and then frequently, for long spells, for the rest of their time together.

It was sheer bad luck that they broke into a shaft from below, and that the shaft was filled with armed foremen; and worse luck that Jakob was working the robot, so that he was the first to leap out firing his hand drill like a weapon, and the only one to get struck by return fire before Naomi threw a knotchopper past him and blew the foremen to shreds. They got him on a car and rolled the robot back and pulled up the track and cut off in a new direction, leaving another Boesman behind to destroy evidence of their passing.

So they were all racing around with the blood and stuff still covering them and the cows mooing in distress and Jakob breathing through clenched teeth in double time, and only Hester and Oliver could sit in the car with him and try to tend him, ripping away the pants from a leg that was all cut up. Hester took a hand drill to cauterize the wounds that were bleeding hard, but Jakob shook his head at her, neck muscles bulging out. "Got the big artery inside of the thigh," he said through his teeth.

Hester hissed. "Come here," she croaked at Solly and the rest. "Stop that and come here!"

They were in a mass of broken quartz, the fractured clear crystals all pink with oxidation. The robot continued drilling away, the air cylinder hissed, the cows mooed. Jakob's breathing was harsh and somehow all of them were also breathing in the same way, irregularly, too fast; so that as his breathing slowed and calmed, theirs did too. He was lying back in the sleeping car, on a bed of hay, staring up at the fractured sparkly quartz ceiling of their tunnel, as if he could see far into it. "All these different kinds of rock," he said, his voice filled with wonder and pain. "You see, the moon itself was the world, once upon a time, and the earth its moon; but there was an impact, and everything changed."

They cut a small side passage in the quartz and left Jakob there, so that when they filled in their tunnel as they moved on he was left behind, in his own deep crypt. And from then on the moon for them was only his big tomb, rolling through space till the sun itself died, as he had said it someday would.

Oliver got them back on a course, feeling radically uncertain of his

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navigational calculations now that Jakob was not there to nod over his shoulder, to approve them. Dully he gave Naomi and Freeman the coordinates for Selene. "But what will we do when we get there?" Jakob had never actually made that clear. Find the leaders of the city, demand justice for the miners? Kill them? Get to the rockets of the great magnetic rail accelerators, and hijack one to Earth? Try to slip unnoticed into the populace?

"You leave that to us," Naomi said. "Just get us there." And he saw a light in Naomi and Freeman's eyes that hadn't been there before. It reminded him of the thing that had chased him the dark, the thing that even Jakob hadn't been able to explain; it frightened him.

So he set the course and they tunneled on as fast as they ever had. They never sang and they rarely talked; they threw themselves at the rock, hurt themselves in the effort, returned to attack it more fiercely than before. When he could not stave off sleep Oliver lay down on Jakob's dried blood, and bitterness filled him like a block of the anorthosite they wrestled with.

They were running out of hay. They killed a cow, ate its roasted flesh. The water recycler's filters were clogging, and their water smelled of urine. Hester listened to the seismometer as often as she could now, and she thought they were being pursued. But she also thought they were approaching Selene's underside.

Naomi laughed, but it wasn't like her old laugh. "You got us there, Oliver. Good work."

Oliver bit back a cry.

"Is it big?" Solly asked.

Hester shook her head. "Doesn't sound like it. Maybe twice the diameter of the Great Bole, not more."

"Good," Freeman said, looking at Naomi.

"But what will we do?" Oliver said.

Hester and Naomi and Freeman and Solly all turned to look at him, eyes blazing like twelve chunks of pure promethium. "We've got eight Boesmans left," Freeman said in a low voice. "All the rest of the explosives add up to a couple more. I'm going to set them just right. It'll be my best work ever, my masterpiece. And we'll blow Selene right off into space."

It took them ten shifts to get all the Boesmans placed to Freeman and Naomi's satisfaction, and then another three to get far enough down and to one side to be protected from the shock of the blast, which luckily for them was directly upward against something that would give, and therefore would have less recoil.

Finally they were set, and they sat in the sleeping car in a circle of six, around the pile of components that sat under the master detonator.

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For a long time they just sat there crosslegged, breathing slowly and staring at it. Staring at each other, in the dark, in perfect redblack clarity. Then Naomi put both arms out, placed her hands carefully on the detonator's button. Mute Elijah put his hands on hers—then Freeman, Hester, Solly, finally Oliver—just in the order that Jakob had taken them. Oliver hesitated, feeling the flesh and bone under his hands, the warmth of his companions. He felt they should say something but he didn't know what it was.

"Seven," Hester croaked suddenly.

"Six," Freeman said.

Elijah blew air through his teeth, hard.

"Four," said Naomi.

"Three!" Solly cried.

"Two," Oliver said.

And they all waited a beat, swallowing hard, waiting for the moon and the man in the moon to speak to them. Then they pressed down on the button. They smashed at it with their fists, hit it so violently they scarcely felt the shock of the explosion.

They had put on vacuum suits and were breathing pure oxygen as they came up the last tunnel, clearing it of rubble. A great number of other shafts were revealed as they moved into the huge conical cavity left by the Boesmans; tunnels snaked away from the cavity in all directions, so that they had sudden long vistas of blasted tubes extending off into the depths of the moon they had come out of. And at the top of the cavity, struggling over its broken edge, over the rounded wall of a new crater. . . .

It was black. It was not like rock. Spread across it was a spill of white points, some bright, some so faint that they disappeared into the black if you looked straight at them. There were thousands of these white points, scattered over a black dome that was not a dome. . . .

And there in the middle, almost directly overhead: a blue and white ball. Big, bright, blue, distant, rounded; half of it bright as a foreman's flash, the other half just a shadow . . . it was clearly round, a big ball in the . . . sky. In the sky.

Wordlessly they stood on the great pile of rubble ringing the edge of their hole. Half buried in the broken anorthosite were shards of clear plastic, steel struts, patches of green glass, fragments of metal, an arm, broken branches, a bit of orange ceramic. Heads back to stare at the ball in the sky, at the astonishing fact of the void, they scarcely noticed these things.

A long time passed, and none of them moved except to look around. Past the jumble of dark trash that had mostly been thrown off in a single

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direction, the surface of the moon was an immense expanse of white hills, as strange and glorious as the stars above. The size of it all! Oliver had never dreamed that everything could be so big.

"The blue must be promethium," Solly said, pointing up at the Earth. "They've covered the whole Earth with the blue we mined."

Their mouths hung open as they stared at it. "How far away is it?" Freeman asked. No one answered.

"There they all are," Solly said. He laughed harshly. "I wish I could blow up the Earth too!"

He walked in circles on the rubble of the crater's rim. The rocket rails, Oliver thought suddenly, must have been in the direction Freeman had sent the debris. Bad luck. The final upward sweep of them poked up out of the dark dirt and glass. Solly pointed at them. His voice was loud in Oliver's ears, it strained the intercom: "Too bad we can't fly to the Earth, and blow it up too! I wish we could!"

And mute Elijah took a few steps, leaped off the mound into the sky, took a swipe with one hand at the blue ball. They laughed at him. "Almost got it, didn't you!" Freeman and Solly tried themselves, and then they all did: taking quick runs, leaping, flying slowly up through space, for five or six or seven seconds, making a grab at the sky overhead, floating back down as if in a dream, to land in a tumble, and try it again . . . It felt wonderful to hang up there at the top of the leap, free in the vacuum, free of gravity and everything else, for just that instant.

After a while they sat down on the new crater's rim, covered with white dust and black dirt. Oliver sat on the very edge of the crater, legs over the edge, so that he could see back down into their sublunar world, at the same time that he looked up into the sky. Three eyes were not enough to judge such immensities. His heart pounded, he felt too intoxicated to move anymore. Tired, drunk. The intercom rasped with the sounds of their breathing, which slowly calmed, fell into a rhythm together. Hester buzzed one phrase of "Bucket" and they laughed softly. They lay back on the rubble, all but Oliver, and stared up into the dizzy reaches of the universe, the velvet black of infinity. Oliver sat with elbows on knees, watched the white hills glowing under the black sky. They were lit by earthlight—earthlight and starlight. The white mountains on the horizon were as sharp-edged as the shards of dome glass sticking out of the rock. And all the time the Earth looked down at him. It was all too fantastic to believe. He drank it in like oxygen, felt it filling him up, expanding in his chest.

"What do you think they'll do with us when they get here?" Solly asked.

"Kill us," Hester croaked.

"Or put us back to work," Naomi added.

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Oliver laughed. Whatever happened, it was impossible in that moment to care. For above them a milky spill of stars lay thrown across the infinite black sky, lighting a million better worlds; while just over their heads the Earth glowed like a fine blue lamp; and under their feet rolled the white hills of the happy moon, holed like a great cheese. ●

NEXT ISSUE

We start the year off with a bang next month, with a jam-packed January issue full of top talent, both established Names and rising new stars. Hot new writer **Steven Popkes** contributes our January cover story, "The Egg," a fast-moving and highly-evocative tale of a boy caught in a deadly web of conflict and intrigue between competing alien races in a far-future Boston that's been opened to the stars. Hugo-and-Nebula winner **Gregory Benford** then takes us along on a near-future expedition to the Red Planet, for a suspenseful and ironic look at "All the Beer on Mars." Then **Alexander Jablokov**—another of those fast-rising new stars I was talking about—takes us on a dizzying roller-coaster ride back and forth through time, as he unravels the intricate, powerful, and tragic story of "The Ring of Memory."

ALSO IN JANUARY: **Pat Murphy**—whose acclaimed "Rachel In Love," published here in 1987, won her the Nebula *and* the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award last year—returns to these pages with an elegant little snapper called "Prescience"; talented new writer **Megan Lindholm,** author of the well-received novel *The Wizard of the Pigeons,* makes her *IAsfm* debut with "Silver Lady and the Fortyish Man," a story that examines the kinds of magic that can survive in even the most prosaic of neighborhood shopping malls; **Dean Whitlock** contributes another of his deceptively-quiet stories, this one an eloquent study of friendship, faith, and "Iridescence"; renowned author **Jane Yolen,** who has been called "the Hans Christian Andersen of the Twentieth Century," spreads before us a tasty and troubling "Feast of Souls,"; **Lawrence Watt-Evans,** whose "Why I Left Harry's All-Night Hamburgers" appeared on both the Hugo and Nebula ballots this year after appearing here *last* year, returns with a razor-edged shocker called "Real Time"; and popular and prolific **Harry Turtledove,** one of *IAsfm*'s most frequent contributors, takes us sideways in time to a turning point that will change the course of history itself, in "Departures." All this—plus our usual array of columns, an index of last year's stories and features, and a ballot for you to use for voting in our Third Annual Reader's Award poll. Look for our jammed-to-the-gills-couldn't-possibly-squeeze-another-page-in January issue on sale on your newsstands on December 13, 1988.

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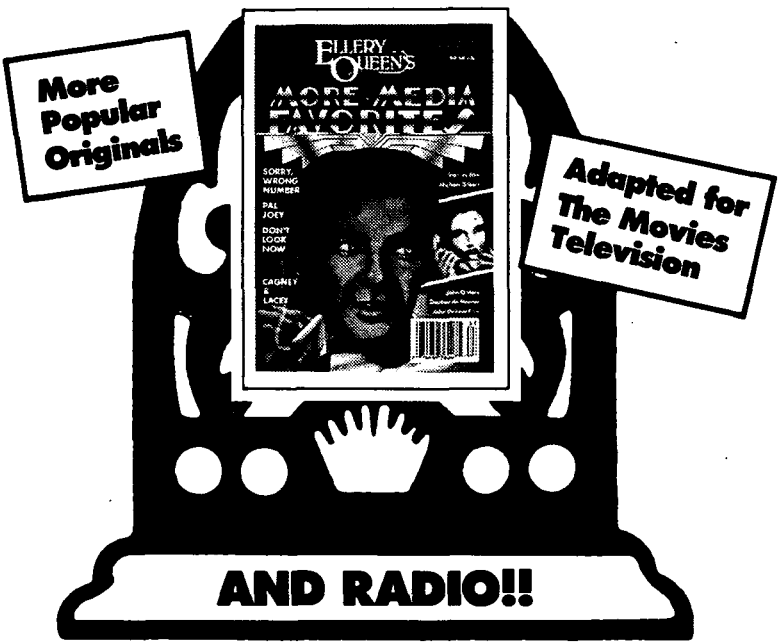

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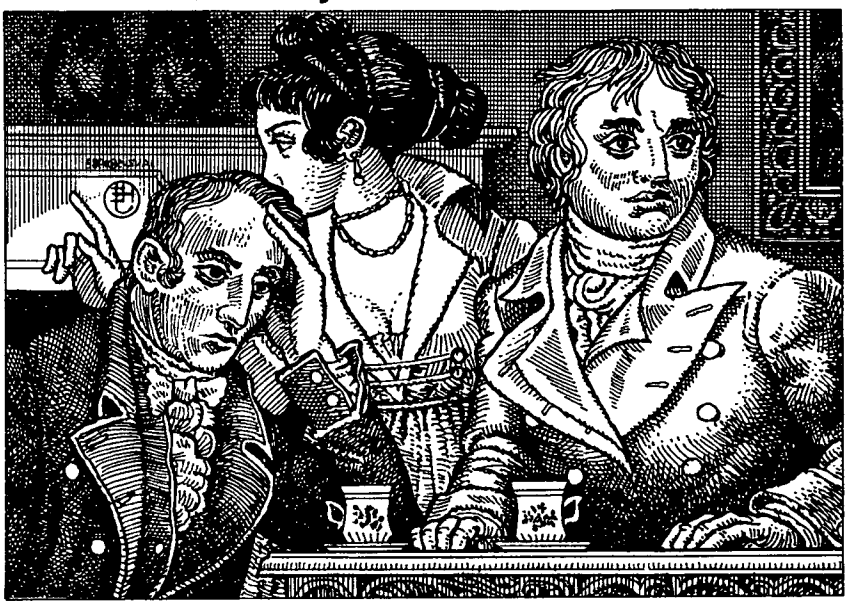
ONE MORNING WITH SAMUEL, DOROTHY, AND WILLIAM



by Avram Davidson

"Oh gentle Reader!" (As the poet says), you just may find "a tale in everything."

art: Hank Jankus

Samuel came down with red eyes, seeking coffee and a biscuit. William was not there. Dorothy was, looking pale, and twining her hands together. "Dorothy," he said, "coffee, please, and a biscuit." She looked very pale, uttered a stifled exclamation, and twisted her hands together. After a moment he said again, "If you please, Dorothy, I desire you will direct the servant to bring me coffee and a biscuit."

"Oh God! Samuel!" she cried. "How can you sit there talking of coffee and a biscuit—" "Because it is far too early in the day to talk of butcher's meat," he said. She uttered a stifled shriek and tugged at the opposite ends of her cambric handkerchief. "—and butcher's meat, when—" "No no, far too early for that," he muttered; "coffee and a biscuit."

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"—when it must be evident to you by my appearance that I am laboring under the greatest conceivable strain to which a passionate and virtuous woman can possibly be subject, particularly when her sentiments are of a loyal and patriotical nature?"

"Java, preferably," he said. "But mocha will do tolerably enough. I've no great objection to mocha. Dorothy, for pity's sake take pity on me and ring for the servant to bring me a cup of—"

Dorothy uttered a stifled scream. "Oh God, Samuel, do you wish to drive me mad?" she exclaimed. She gave the bell-pull a tug, and staggered.

"Less of that French brandy, Miss W., is my advice to you," he said.

"It is not the minute quantity of French brandy, which I take purely upon the advice of my medical man, who pronounces it a sovereign alexipharmacal against the vapours, it is that Mr. Fitzgeorge has again offered to place me in an establishment which—"

In came Jenny the servantgirl, dropping a courtesy. Samuel leered at her behind a copy of the *Unitarian Intelligencer*.

"Jenniver, a cup of coffee—java if we have it—and a biscuit, for Mr. Samuel."

"Yesmum," said the girl. "Almond, carraway seed, currant, sugar, or plain?"

"Provoking girl!" exclaimed Dorothy; "leave the room at once and bring a cup of coffee, do you hear, and a biscuit of any description. Go! They all want to kill me," she said, in a low, strained voice. William came in, looking pale and spiritual.

"I don't want to kill you, Doll," said Samuel. "You've got the vapours again. Tell me all about your fat friend, do."

Dorothy pressed her hand to her bosom. "I have often desired you not to refer to Mr. Fitzgeorge by that oleaginous descriptive," she said. "You know that he assures me he holds a very high though confidential position in His Majesty's Government. William! Why are your knees green again?"

William sighed, staggered suddenly, sat down suddenly, looked dreamily at his knees.

" 'Tis grass! Of all substances exceedingly difficult to a *degree* to remove from the knees of linen unmentionables, William, grass is the—"

"It was the loveliest daffodil, dearest Dorothy," William said.

Samuel sniggered. "Was *that* her name?" he enquired. "No wonder you look so weak."

William gazed at him, ethereally. "I do. I do? Ah, you see, you observe it also, Samuel. There is something about flowers which— Ah, Jenniver, bless you, gel, I needed that coffee and that biscuit." His fingers touched her, lightly. She jumped and gave a small scream, "La Mr. Wulliam sir!"

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Samuel watched with open mouth and working throat as William, his eyes raised politely, drank the coffee. Samuel turned to Jenniver, but she, with a flounce and a simper, had already left the room, after pausing at the door to smile at William, who gave a gentle and benevolent ogle.

Dorothy said, "I have informed Mr. Fitzgeorge that although I have not been unmindful of his regard, whilst his dear Papa is unable to give consent to his son's offering marriage, all other considerations, such as a carriage, a cottage, a curricle—

"Samuel! Samuel, where are you going, Samuel, with that horrid look upon your face? Samuel, Samuel, not that dreadful substance in the vile vial again?"

But Samuel was already halfway up the stairs. Behind him he heard William say, "Dearest Dorothy, it is merely med'cine, Samuel's nerves are not strong . . . Eh? What is that? My knees? Ah, 'twas the loveliest flower, so soft, so swee—" And then the bed-sitting-room door closed.

Samuel half-groaned, half-sighed his relief, opened the huge Bible on his table to the Apocrypha, and, bending his head, from in between The Book of Tobit and The Song of the Three Children, took out a small bottle containing a ruby tincture of which he promptly filled a wineglassful, and tossed it down with a glottal sound of gratification. Then he seated himself and reached very slowly for some sheets of blank papers and the bottle of ink. He stayed thus for quite some time whilst an expression of serenity and of knowing slowly spread across his face, totally replacing the look of confusion and vexation which had been there before. And, so, at last, with an air of dreamy beatitude, he trimmed a fresh point to the quill and dipped it and wrote and wrote and he wrote and—

"I see that it is quite useless for me to endeavor to act the part of a true friend, Samuel," the voice of Dorothy rang in his ears. He wrote on. He wrote on. "Nay, Samuel, have the modicum of common gentility which would oblige you to give ear even to the address of a servant, and set aside your pen for one mere moment, Samuel. There is a person to see you."

Presently he became aware that she had left and that a strange face was looking at him. Slowly his hand faltered. He tried to go on with his writing, but the face grew larger and redder and sterner and then began speaking to him and although he urged it to go away, go away it would not. "The Doge of Venice?" he asked, hissingly. "The Great Cham? The Old Man of the Mountains?" *Ssssss*. "The Negusss of—"

"None of them coves," the red face said. "Samivel 'Uggins, h'of 'Is Majesty's Hexcise Sarvice, sir. Sarvint, sir. Hin regards now, to that 'ere little flagon or as yer might call it h'a flask sir, h'of hopium, sir, now, no doubt you 'as the receept to show h'as 'ow the proper hexcise tax as been paid h'on it?"

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Numbly, dumbly, Samuel shook his head.

The gager nodded. "Just has I thort. One a them gents has thinks yer habove the Lore, does yer? Well, we knows 'ow to 'andle the likes of you, come along now and no strugglin', see, hor it's the mace—" Then his expression changed as he saw Samuel's eyes rolling about like those of some cornered beast; instead of brutal, became sly. "Hunless, h'of course, now, you 'appens to want to settle hout of court; say, two guineas, to cover hexcise tax, fines, costs, h'and—"

A furious voice shouted, "What's this? What's *this?*" It was Dorothy's fat friend again. Mr. Huggins' red face went white and he fell to his knees. "Ho Gord, hit's the Prince!" he cried.

Mr. Fitzgeorge's fat fist, covered in greasy hand-lotion and bright with jeweled rings, came down upon the head of the terrified gager with a thump. "Get out of this, never come back, don't breathe a word, or it's Botany Bay!" Thump, thump, thump, he thumped the revenuer out the door; turned and gave Samuel a look and a wink and placed his index finger alongside his nose, and was gone.

In came William. In came Dorothy. "Was it about the French brandy?" asked Dorothy.

William said, "Ah, you've been writing again, Samuel. Oh, good. Excellent. Let me see." Samuel's eyes were very red. His throat and mouth dreadfully dry. He opened his lips and he croaked his want. "Not bad," said William indulgently.

Dorothy said, "What, Samuel? *Coffee? Again?* No wonder your eyes are red!"

William said, "Not bad. *For he hath fed on honeydew, and drunk the milk of paradise.* Rather a nice image, and not at all bad for a closing line."

Samuel's head jerked up. "Closing line? Nonsense? What do you mean? There are at least thirty more verses!" Sheet after sheet of paper he scattered and scanned; but all were blank. "I had them all in my head," he muttered, stunned. "In my mind . . ." But his head ached, and his mind was as blank as the paper.

Dorothy said, "You must endeavor to lead a more regular life, Samuel, and avoid low associates. What did that vulgar person from the Porlock Excise Station want with you?"

Samuel uttered a wail. He *had* to regain his lost images. He snatched for the vial of laudanum. But there was only a bottle-shaped dent in the pages of the Apocrypha to show where it had been. "My poem!" he screamed. "My beautiful poem! Gone! Everything gone! I'll never get it back, never! That bloody nark! He's busted my stash!"

Dorothy shrieked, pressed her hands to her ears. But William, tolerant, indulgent, merely looked at him benignly. "Sometimes you use very curious expressions, Samuel," he said. ●

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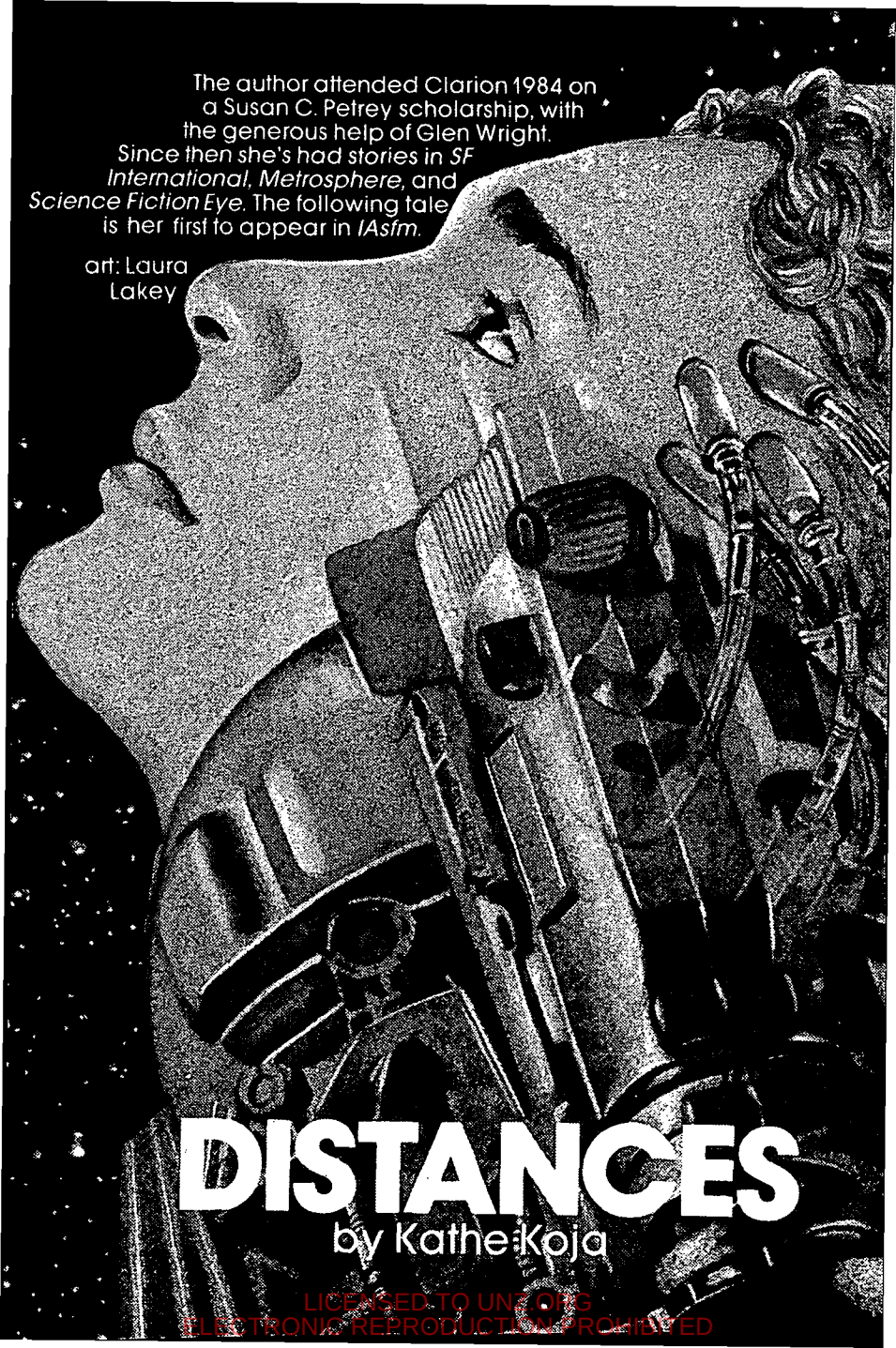

The author attended Clarion 1984 on a Susan C. Petrey scholarship, with the generous help of Glen Wright. Since then she's had stories in *SF International*, *Metrosphere*, and *Science Fiction Eye*. The following tale is her first to appear in *IAsfm*.

art: Laura Lakey

DISTANCES

by Kathe Koja

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Michael, naked on the table, hospital reek curling down his throat, the base of his skull rich with the ache it has had every day since the first one, will probably never lose. He remembers that day: parts of him stone-numb, other parts prickling and alive; moving to make sure he still could; exhilaration; and the sense of the jacks. They had said he would not, physically could not, feel the implants. Wrong—needle-slim, they seemed like pylons, silver pillars underskin.

He is tall, under the straps; his feet are cold. Three months' postsurgery growth of yellow hair, already curling. Grey eyes' glance roams the ceiling, bare peripherals.

He shifts, a little; the attendant gives him a faraway scowl. The old familiar strap-in: immobilize the head, check CNS response, check for fluid leak, check check check. "I am *fine*," he growls, chin strap digging into his jawline, "just fucking fine," but the attendant, rhino-sized, silent, ignores him entirely.

The ceiling monitor lights, bright and unexpected. Now what?

A woman, dark hair, wide mouth, cheekbones like a cat's, white baggy labcoat shoulders. "Hi," she says. "Doing all right?"

"Just ducky," tightmouthed, tin man with rusted jaw. Don't tell me, he thinks, more tests. "Who're you? A doctor?"

She appears to find this pretty funny. "Not hardly. I'm your handler. My name's Halloran." Something offscreen causes that wide mouth to turn down, impatient curvature. "I'll be in in a couple of minutes, we've got a meeting.—Yeah I *heard* you!" and the screen blanks.

Check-up over, Michael rubs the spots where the straps were. "Excuse me," he says to the attendant. "That woman who was just onscreen—you know her?"

"Yeah, I know her." The attendant seems affronted. "She's a real bitch."

That charcoal drawl, bass whisper from babyface: "Oh good. I hate synthetics."

"So who's he? General Custer?"

Halloran beside him, scent of contraband chocolate mints, slipping him handfuls. They are part of a ten-pair group in an egg-shaped conference room, white jacket and bald head droning away in accentless medspeak at the chopped-down podium. The air is ripe with dedication.

"That's Bruce, Dr. Bruce, the director. You're supposed to be listening to this."

"I am. Just not continuously."

Dreamy genius meets genius-dreamer. Bad kids in the back of the class, jokes and deadpan, catching on faster than anyone anyway. NASA'd done its profile work magnificently this time: the minute of physical meeting told them that, told them also that, if it was engineered

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(and it was), so what: it's great. Maybe all the other pairs feel the same. That's the goal, anyway. NASA believes there must be something better than a working relationship between handler and glasshead, more than a merely professional bond.

"He always snort like that when he talks?"

"You should hear him when he's not talking."

Dr. Bruce: ". . . bidirectional. The sealed fiber interface, or SFI, affords us—"

"Glass fibers for glass heads."

"Beats an extension cord."

Her hair is a year longer than his, but looking in the mirror would show Michael the back of her skull: it's his. Handlers are first-generation glassheads, just technically imperfect enough to warrant a new improved version—but hey, don't feel bad, you're still useful. We can put you to work training your successors, the ones who'll fly where you can never go; train them to do what you want to; brutally practical demonstration of the Those Who-Can't principle. But who better to handle a glasshead but a glasshead?

". . . which by now I'm sure you're all used to." Dr. Bruce again. "But these are extremely important tests. We'll be using the results to determine your final project placement. I know Project Arrowhead is the plum assignment, but the others are valuable, very much so, if not as strictly 'glamorous.' " He says it that way, quotes and all, into a room that suddenly stinks of raw tension. "Handlers, you'll be final-prepping the tandem quarters. Also there's a meeting at 1700. Subjects—"

"That's you," sucking on a mint. Hint of chocolate on those wide lips.

"Actually I'm more of an object."

"—under supervisory care for the balance of the day. Everyone, please remember and observe the security regulations."

"No shootouts in the hallways, huh?"

"No. But don't worry." Halloran gives him a sideways look. "We'll figure out a way to have fun."

Arrowhead: inhouse they call it "Voyager's big brother." Far, far away: Proxima Centauri. The big news came from the van de Kamp lunar telescope, where the results of new proper motion studies confirmed what everyone had, happily, suspected: bedrock evidence of at least three planets. At *least.* The possibility of others, and the complexity of their facefirst exploration, precluded the use of even the most sophisticated AI probe. Build new ones, right? No. Something better.

Thus Arrowhead. And glasshead tech gives it eyes and ears, with almost zero lagtime. This last is accomplished by beaucoup-FTL comlink: two big tin cans on a tachyon string. The tech itself was diplomatically

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extorted from the Japanese, who nearly twelve years before had helped to construct and launch the machine half of Arrowhead, engineered to interface with a human component that did not yet exist, and proved far more difficult to develop.

At last: the glassheads. Manned exploration without live-body risk and inherent baggage. Data absorbed by the lucky subject through thinnest fibers, jacked from receiving port into said subject's brain. The void as seen by human eyes.

Who wanted a humdrum assignment like sneaking spysat, or making tanks squaredance, when you could ride Arrowhead and be Cortez?

"Hey. State of the art barracks." Michael takes a slow self-conscious seat on the aggressively new, orthopedically sound bed. "Kinda makes you glad this isn't the bad old days, when NASA got the shitty end of every stick."

"Oh yeah, they thought of everything but good taste." Halloran's voice is exquisitely tired. She settles on the other side of the bed, one foot up, one dangling, and talks—inevitably—of Arrowhead. As she speaks her face shifts and changes play across the mobile muscles, taut stalks of bone. She could be a woman talking of her lover, explaining to a stranger. One hand rubs the back of her neck, erratic rhythm.

"It was so *nuts*," that first group. "Everybody just out for blood. Especially me and Ferrante." Paranoia, envy, round-the-clock jockeying, rumors of sabotage and doctored scores. "Everybody in high-gear bastard twenty-four hours a day. It was all I could think of. I'd wake up in the middle of the night, my heart's going a mile a minute, thinking, Did Bruce see my scores today, really *see* them? I mean does he know I'm the only one who can *do* this?" Her hands stray from neck to hair, weave and twist among the dark locks. Her want shines like a lamp.

"You got it, didn't you." It's no question, and she knows it.

"Yeah, I got it. That's how they found out the tech wasn't up to spec." Her voice is absolutely level. "Fucked up, you know, in a simulator. When they told me I'd never be able to go, in any capacity—and I thought of them all, believe me—when they told me, I wanted to just cut out the jacks and die." She says this without self-pity, without the faintest taint of melodrama, as if it is the only natural thing to want under the circumstances. "Then they told me about Plan B. Which is you."

"And so you stayed."

"And so I stayed."

Quiet. The sonorous hum of air, recirculating. Low nimbus of greenish light around Michael's head, his glance down, almost shy, trying to see those days, knowing her pain too well to imagine it. Halloran's hand grabs at her neck; he knows it aches.

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"You better not fuck me up, Michael."

"I won't."

"I know."

Silence. Where another would retreat, he pushes forward. "Know what I was doing, when they called me? When they told me I made the cut?"

"What?" Her hands leave her neck, clasp, unclasp, settle like skittish birds. "What were you doing?"

"Singing," promptly, grinning, delighted with the memory. "It was late, they were trying to find me all day and I didn't know it. I was sure I hadn't made it and I was sad, and pissed, so I went down to the bar and started drinking, and by midnight I was up onstage. And at twenty after one—I'll never forget it—this guy comes up to me and says, Hey Michael, some guy from NASA's on the phone, he wants to talk to you. And I knew it! And you know what else?" He leans forward, not noticing then that she loves this story almost as much as he does, not surprised that a comparative stranger can share this glee so fully. "I'd been drinkin' all night, right, and I should've been drunk, but I wasn't. Not till he called." He laughs, still floored, having the joy of it all over again. "I was so drunk when I talked to him, I thought Boy you must sound like a real *ripe* asshole, boy, but I was so happy I didn't give a shit." He laughs again. "I hung up and went back onstage and sang like a son of a bitch till four thirty in the morning, and then I got some eggs and grits and got on the plane for Atlanta."

She puts up an eyebrow. "What's the name of the band?"

"Chronic Six. Chronics one through five busted up." It is the perfect question, and nobody's surprised, or surprised that they're not.

Early days: the pairs, teams as Bruce calls them, solidify. Very little talk between them, and all of it polite. Scrupulous. The glassheads-turned-handlers are avid to better last time's run: they sniff the way old packmates will, hunt weaknesses and soft spots, watch around the clock. The ones they want most are Halloran and her smartass protegé; the Two-Headed Monster; the self-proclaimed Team Chronic.

Too-loud music from their quarters, morning ritual of killer coffee drunk only from twin black handleless mugs, labcoats sleeve-slashed and mutilated, "Team Chronic" in black laundry marker across the back, chocolate mints and slogans and mystic aggression, attitude with a capital A. Her snap and his drawl, her detail-stare and his big-picture sprawl, their way of finishing each other's sentences, of knowing as if by eyeless instinct what the other will do. Above all, their way of winning. And winning.

"Everybody hates us," Halloran at meal break, murmuring behind a crust of lunch. "They hated me, too, before."

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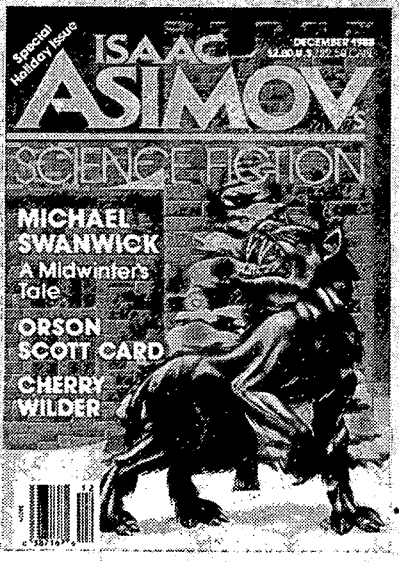

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Michael shrugs with vast satisfaction. "All the world hates a winner."

"*And*," smiling now, coffee steam fragrant around bright eyes, "they can't even scream teacher's pet, because Bruce hates us too."

"Bruce doesn't hate us. He loathes us."

They're laughing this over when: "Halloran." White hand on her shoulder, faint smell of mustard: Ferrante. Old foe, pudgy in immaculate whites, handsome heavy face bare with anger. Behind him, standing like a duelist's second, Ruthann Duvall, his glasshead, her expression aping his. The whole cafeteria is watching.

"I want to talk to you, Halloran."

"Feel free. I've had all my shots."

"Shots is right," Ferrante says. He is obviously on the verge of some kind of fury-fit. "You're *enhanced*," meaning chemically enhanced, meaning illegally doctored; no Inquisitor could have denounced her with more élan. Everyone leans forward, spectators around the cockfight pit. "I'd think that even you would recognize that you're disrupting the integrity of the whole project, but that's never mattered to you, has it? *Or*," sparing, then, a look for Michael, who sits finger-linked and mild, looking up at Ferrante with what appears to be innocent interest, "your foul-mouthed shadow."

Halloran, cocked head, voice sweet with insult: "Oh, I know the species of bug that's up *your* ass—you're stuck in second best and you can't figure out why. Well, let me make it crystal for you, slim: you suck."

"What if I go to Dr. Bruce and ask for a chem scan?"

"What if I jack you into the sanitation system, you big piece of shit?"

His fat white hand clops on her shoulder, shoving her so she slews into Michael and both nearly topple. Immediately she is on her feet, on the attack, pursuing, slapping, driving him towards the cafeteria door. Michael, beside her, grabs the avenging arms: "Let him go, the son of a bitch," and indeed Ferrante takes almost indecent advantage of the moment, leaves, with Ruthann Duvall—contemptuously shaking her still-nearly-bald head—following, muttering, in her mentor's wake.

"Fuck you too, tennis ball head!" Halloran yells, then notices a strange sound coming from Michael: the grunt of suppressed laughter. It's too much, it blows out of him, hands on thighs and bent over with hilarity, and somebody else joins and somebody else too and finally the whole room is laughing. Even Halloran, who is first to stop.

"Let's go," she says.

Michael rubs helplessly at his eyes. "Tennis ball head!" He can't stop laughing.

Third week. Long, long day. In their quarters, blast music on, Michael

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bare-chested on the floor, Halloran rubbing her neck, the muscles thick and painful. Michael watches her, the sore motions.

"Do your jacks ever hurt?"

"*No*!"

"Mine do. All the time."

"No they *don't*! They're not supposed to!"

He raises his brows at her vehemence, waits.

"All right," she says at last, "you're right. They hurt. But I thought it was because I'm—you know. Defective." Fiercely: "*You're* not defective. It must just be phantom pain."

"A phantom pain in the ass." He sits up, pushes her hands away, begins to massage her hunched shoulders. "Listen, Halloran." His hands are very strong. "There isn't anything wrong with me. Got that? Nothing. So relax." He squeezes, harder and harder, forcing the muscles to give.

"So," squeezing, "when do we jack?"

"We've been jacking all damn day."

"I mean together."

"I don't know." Pleasure in her voice, the pain lessening. "That's up to Bruce, he does all the scheduling."

"The hell with Bruce. Let's do it now."

"*What*?" Even she, rebel, has not considered this. "We can't," already wondering why not, really—if they can jack into the computer—"It's never been done, that I know of, not so early."

"Now we *really* have to." He's already on his feet, making for his labcoat, taking from the inner breast pocket a two-meter length of fiber, cased in protective cord, swings it gently jackend like a pendulum at Halloran, a magic tool, you are getting verrrrry sleeeepy. "Come on," he says. "Just for fun."

There is no resisting. "All right," she says. "Just wait a minute." There's a little timer on her wall desk; she sets it for ten minutes. "When this times out, so do we. Agreed?"

"Sure thing." He's already plugged in, conjurer's hands, quicker than her eye. He reaches up to guide her down. "Ready?"

"Yeah."

They've jacked in simulation, to prepare; it is, now, the difference between seeing the ocean and swimming, seeing food and eating. They are swamped with it, carried, tumbled, at the moment of mutual entry eyes flash wide, twinned, seeing, knowing, hot with it, incredible

Michael it's *strong* stronger than I thought it would

know I know great *look* at this

and faster than belief thoughts and images burst between them, claiming them, devouring them as they devour, all of each shown to the other without edit or exception, all of it running the link, the living line, a

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knowing vaster than any other, unthinkably complex, here, now, us, look look see *this*, without any words; they dance the long corridors of memory, and pain, and sorrow, see old fears, old joys, dead dreams, new happinesses bright as silver streamers, nuance of being direct and pure, sledgehammer in the blood, going on forever, profound communion and

finally it is Halloran who pulls back, draws them out, whose caution wakes enough to warn that time is over. They unplug simultaneously, mutual shudder of disunity, a chill of spirit strong enough to pain. They sit back, stunned; the real world is too flat after such a dimensionless feast.

Words are less than useless. In silence is comfort, the knowing —*knowing*—that one lives who knows you beyond intimacy; two souls, strung hard, adrift on the peculiar fear of the proud, the fear of being forced to go naked in terrible weakness and distress, and finding here the fear is toothless, that knowing and being utterly known could be, is, not exposure but safety, the doctrine of ultimate trust made perfect by glasshead tech.

They move into each other's arms, still not speaking.

Tears are running down Michael's face; his eyes are closed.

Halloran's hands are ice-cold on his wrists.

"We've been jacked all night," she says, "it's almost morning."

She can feel his body shaking, gently, the slow regular hitching of his chest. She has never loved anyone so much in all her life.

Is it chance, rogue coincidence, that the next day Bruce schedules a dual jack, a climatizer as he calls it? Between them, there is much secret hilarity, expressed in a smile here, a less-than-gesture there, and when they do dual, for real and on the record, they swoop and march in flawless tandem, working as one; the simulated tasks are almost ridiculously simple to complete, and perfectly.

Bruce still loathes them, but is undeniably impressed. "There's something about them," he tells a subordinate, who tells someone else, who mentions it sotto voce at dinner break, mostly to piss off Ferrante, who is nobody's favorite either. Michael and Halloran hear, too, but go on eating, serene, prefab biscuits and freeze-dried stew.

The tests seem, now, redundant, and Michael is impatient, growing more so. He lusts for the void, can almost taste its unforgiving null. "What is this shit?" he complains one night, face sideways-pressed into pillow, Halloran's small hands strong on back and buttocks. "The damn thing'll be there and back before we ever get a chance to ride it."

More tests. NASA is stultifyingly thorough.

More tests. Intense. Ruthann Duvall vomits her morning sausage in

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simulation; the sausage, of course, is very real. "Don't you know," Michael tells her, "that's not the way to send back your breakfast?"

More tests.

"*Fuck*!" Halloran feels like wrecking something. She contents herself with smokebomb curses. "This is getting to me, you know that, this is really fucking *getting* to me."

Maybe even Bruce, the king of caution, has had enough. The waiting is driving everyone mad, madder than before, the daily speculation, the aura of tension thick as gasoline smoke. Surely they must know, those testers, those considerers of results, surely they must know who is meant to fly, who is the best.

They don't need a victory party. They are a victory party.

No one is really, truly, happy for them. Michael is no darling, and this is Halloran's second sweep; besides, Team Chronic has rubbed too many raw spots to be favorites now. All the others can hope for, in their darkest moments, is project failure, but then of course they feel like shits: nobody really wants Arrowhead to fail, no matter who's riding it.

The winners are wild in their joy; the strain has broken, the goal achieved, the certainty blue-ribbon and bright confirmed. They order up beer, the closest they can get to champagne, and one by one, team by team, the others drift by to join in. Ferrante and Duvall do not, of course, attend, instead spending the evening reviewing data, searching for the flaw that cannot be found.

Everyone gets drunk, yells, laughs loud. Even in losing out there is a certain comfort—at least the waiting is over. And their assignments, while (as Bruce noted) not "glamorous," are still interesting, worthy of excitement. Everyone talks about what they're going to do, while silently, unanimously, envying the radiant Michael.

Somebody takes a picture: Michael, beer in hand, mutilated labcoat and denim cap askew, sneakered feet crossed at the ankles, hair a halo and eyes—they are—like stars; one arm around Halloran, dark, intent, a flush on her cheekbones, hair pushed messily back, wearing a button on her lapel—if you look very closely at the picture you can read the words: "Has The World Gone Mad, Or Am I At Work?"

His work area is almost ludicrously bare. The physical jacking in, 2mm cord running to a superconducting supercomputer—that's all. The comlink system is housed elsewhere. In contrast to the manual backup equipment, resembling the cockpit of a suborbital fighter in its daunting complexity, he could be in a broom closet.

He has taken almost obsessive care to furnish his domain. Totems of various meanings and symbolisms are placed with fastidious precision.

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His bicycle bottle of mineral water, here; the remnants of his original labcoat, draped over his chairback here; his handleless black mug, sticky, most times, with aging grounds, here; pertinent memos and directives that no one must disturb, in this messy heap here; a bumpersticker that reads "Even if I gave a shit, I still wouldn't care," pasted at a strict diagonal across the wall before him; and, in the place of honor, the party-picture.

He loves his work.

It goes without saying, but he does. He cannot imagine, now, another way to live, as if, meeting by chance the lover he has always dreamed of, he thinks of life without her scent and kiss, her morning joke. Riding Arrowhead is all he ever expected, dreamed it to be, only better, better. He does his work—now, guiding Arrowhead through systems check in deceleration mode, realtime course correction to prepare for the big show—and has his play, the sheer flying, ecstasy of blackness, emptiness at his fingertips, in his mouth, flowing over his pores so hungry for mystery that they soak like new sponges. He eats it, all of it, drunk with delight, absorbing every morsel.

In their quarters is a remote terminal. It goes unused.

Other handlers work their subjects still, guiding them through maintenance routines, or geosynchronous dances, or linkups close and far; they are needed, to some degree; their tech has uses. Not that the subjects will not leave them behind, to NASA's prosaic mercies, to other work for handlers whose glassheads have outstripped them. They are on their way out. It was the pre-est of preordained. But not just yet.

Halloran is useless.

Her tech cannot fly Arrowhead—*that* was graphically proved. She cannot interface directly with the audacious bundle streaking across heaven; cannot in fact guide Michael; he is already far beyond her abilities. Despite any projections to the contrary, she has no function. She is required, now, only to keep Michael happy, on an even keel; when he stabilizes, breaks completely to harness, she will no longer be even marginally necessary.

She has busywork, of course. She "charts." She "observes." She "documents." She is strictly prohibited to use the room remote. It will hurt her. She knows this.

She is in the room one twilight, finishing the last of her daily "reports." She is wearing a castoff flightsuit, the irony of which only she can honestly appreciate. Her hair is clubbed back in a greasy bow. She refuses to think about the future. Sometimes, at night, her stomach aches so sourly she wants to scream, knows she will, doesn't.

"Hi." Michael, tray in hand, smile he tries to make natural. Her pain makes him miserable. He goes, every day, where she is technologically

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forbidden to enter: she stands at the gate while he soars inside. There is never any hint that she begrudges: she would scream like a banshee if ever came the slightest whisper of withdrawal from the project. He is as close as she can get; even the light of the fire is warmth, of a kind.

"Brought you some slop. Here," and sets it before her, gentle, seats himself at her side. "Mind if I graze?"

"Help yourself."

He eats, or tries to. She messes the food, rubs it across the plate, pretends. "Music?" she asks, trying to do her part.

"Sure. How 'bout some Transplant?"

"Okay." She turns it on, the loudest of the blast purveyors, nihilism in 4/4 time. "Good run today?"

"Great. You see the sheets?"

"Yeah. Outstanding."

He cannot answer that. They play at eating for a little while longer, Transplant thrashing in the background; then Michael shoves the tray aside.

"Jack with me," he says, pleads, commands.

This is what she lives for. "Okay," she says.

Inner workings, corridors, a vastness she can know, share. O, she tells him. Without words; trying to hide what cannot be hidden, trying to bear the brunt. He sees, knows, breaks into her courage, as he does each time; his way of sharing it, of taking what he can onto his shoulders. Don't, he says. No, she says.

Wordless, they undress, fit bodies together, make physical love. He is crying. He often cries, now. She is dry-eyed, wet below. The pleasure suffuses, brings its own panacea, is enough for the moment. They ride those waves, peak after peak, trailing down, whispering sighs into each other's open mouths. Her sweat smells sweet to him, like nothing else. He licks her shoulders. He has stopped crying, but only just.

To stay jacked this way too long, after a day of Arrowhead, will exhaust him, perhaps mar his efficiency. She is the one who broaches a stop.

No

Don't be an asshole yes

No

I am

and she does. He grapples, wide-eyed, for a moment, tears free his own jack. "Don't *do* that!" he cries, then sinks back, rubbing rough at his neck.

"I don't want to hurt you," she says, and the cry she has withheld so sternly for so long breaks out; she weeps, explosion, and he holds her, helpless. What to do, what to do; nothing. Nothing to do.

* * *

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The symptoms are subtle.

Besides the nighttime bellyache, which Halloran has learned to ignore if not subdue, come other things, less palatable. Her jacks pain her, sometimes outrageously. Her joints hurt. She has no appetite. It is so difficult to sleep that she has requested, and received, barbiturates. The fact that they gave her no argument about the drugs makes her wonder. Do they A) just not care if she dopes herself stupid or B) have another reason, i.e., more requests? Is everybody breaking down?

Incredibly, yes. The handlers are beginning—in the startlingly crude NASAspeak—to corrode. The glassheads are still okay, doing swimmingly, making hay with their billion-dollar tech. The handlers are slowly going to shit, each in his or her own destructive orbit but with some symptoms universal. Entropy, Halloran thinks, laughing in a cold hysteric way: Built-in byebye.

But it is not built in. She accesses Bruce's files, breaking their so-called security with contemptuous angry ease, finds that this situation is as shocking to the brass as it is to the handlers. The ex-glassheads. Broken glassheads.

No one is discussing it, not that she knows of. In the cafeteria, at the now-infrequent meetings, she searches them, looks minute and increasingly desperate, hunting their dissolution: does Ryerson look thinner? Wickerman's face seem blotchy. Ferrante has big bags under his eyes. She knows they are watching her, too, seeing her corrosion, drawing conclusions that must inevitably coincide. While in the meantime hell freezes over, waiting for Bruce to bring it up.

She says nothing to Michael about any of it. When they jack, the relief of not having to think about it sweeps her mind clean; she is there, in that moment, in a way she is never anywhere else, at any time, anymore.

Bruce comes to see her one morning. She logs off, faces him, feels the numb patches around lips and wrist begin to throb.

"We don't understand it," he begins.

"Yeah, I know."

"There are various treatments being contemplated." He looks genuinely distressed. For the first time it begins to dawn: this is more than breakdown. This is death. Or maybe. Probably. Otherwise why the careful face, the eyes that won't, will *not*, meet hers. Her voice rises, high vowels, hating the fear of it but unable to quell.

"We're thinking of relocating you," Bruce says. "All the handlers."

"Where?"

"South Carolina," he says. "The treatments—" Pause. "We don't want the subjects . . . we don't want to dismay them."

Dismay? "What am I supposed to tell him?" She is shouting. No, she is screaming. "What am I supposed to *tell* him? That I'm going on VA-

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CATION?!" Really sceaming now. Get hold of yourself, girl, part of her says, while the other keeps making noise.

"For God's sake, Halloran!" Bruce is shaking her. That in itself quiets her down; it's so damned theatrical. For God's Sake Halloran! oh ha ha ha, HA HA HA stop it!

"We have no concrete plans, yet," he says, when she is calm enough to listen. "In fact if you have any ideas—about how to inform the subjects—" He looks at her, hopeful.

Get out, Bruce. I can't think about dying with that face of yours in the room. "I'll be sure and send you a memo." It is dismissal; the tone comes easy. In the face of death, getting reprimanded seems, somehow, unimportant. Ha HA: you better stop it or you're going to flip right out.

No more bogus "reports." She sits, stares at her hands, thinking of Michael flying in the dark, thinking of that other dark, the real dark, the biggest dark of all. Oh God, not me. Please not me.

"Something's wrong."

Michael, holding her close, his breath in her damp hair.

"Something's *bad* wrong, Halloran, and you better tell me what it is."

Silence.

"Halloran—"

"I don't . . . I don't want to—" dismay "—worry you. It's a metabolic disturbance," and how easily, how gracefully, the lies roll off her tongue. She could give lessons. Teach a course. A short course. "Don't get your balls in an uproar," and she laughs.

"You," he says, measured, considering, "are a fucking liar." He is plugged in, oh yes, he's going to get to the bottom of this and none of her bullshit about metabolic disturbances, and he pins her down, jacks her in. One way or another he's going to find out what the hell's going on around here.

He finds out.

"South Carolina, what the hell do you mean South Carolina!"

"That's where they want to send us. Some kind of treatment center, a clinic." Voice rough and exhausted from hours of crying, of fighting to comfort. "Bruce seems to think—well, you know, you saw." She is so immensely tired, and somehow, selfishly, relieved: they share this, too. "Don't ask me, I—"

"Why can't they do whatever they have to do right here?" There is that in him that refuses to think of it in any way other than a temporary malfunction. She will be treated, she will be cured. "Why do they have to send you away?"

"You know why."

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"How the fuck can I work anyway!" He is the one screaming, now. "How do they expect me to do anything!"

The bond, the tie that binds, cuts deeper than NASA intended, or wants. For all the teams it is the same: the glassheads, even those whose handlers have, like Halloran, become token presences, *want their handlers*. They *need* them. Bruce and his people are in the unhappy position of trying to separate high-strung children from their very favorite stuffed animals now that the stuffing is coming out. *And* trying to disguise the disintegration at the same time. It is the quintessential no-win situation. Uncountable dollars down the drain with one batch, the other batch sniffing stress and getting antsy and maybe not able to work at all.

And for the closest of them, Team Chronic, it is even worse. How do Siamese twins, *happy* Siamese twins, feel when the scalpel bites?

"Just a little more."

"Stop it." She is surly in her pain. "You're not my mother. Stop trying to make me eat."

"You have to eat, asshole!" He is all at once furious, weeks' worth of worry geysering now. "How do you ever expect to get better if you don't eat?"

"I'm not going to get better!"

"Yes you are. Don't even say that. You are going to get better." He says each word with the unshakable conviction of terror. "And you'd be getting better faster if you'd just cooperate a little."

"Stop it! Stop making it my fault!" She stands up, shaking; an observer, seeing her last a year ago, would be shocked silent at her deterioration. She is translucent with her illness; not ugly or wasted, but simply less and less *there*. "*They* did this to me!" She scratches at her neck, wild, as if trying to dig out the jacks. "*They* made me sick! It's not my fault, Michael, none of it is my fault!"

He starts to cry. "I know I know," hands over his face, "I know I know I know," monotonously, and she sweeps the tray from the table, slapping food on floor, spattering walls, kicking the plastic plate into flight. Then, on her knees beside him, exhausted from the strain of anger, her arms around him, rocking him gently back and forth as he grips her forearms, and sobs as if his heart will break, as if his body will splinter with the force. "I know," she says, softly, into his ear. "I know just how you feel. Don't cry. Please, don't cry."

"There goes the bastard," says a subordinate to Bruce, as Michael slips past them down the corridor. "One minute he's tearing your head off because you touched his coffee cup, the next minute he won't even answer you or acknowledge you're alive."

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"He's under enormous stress, Lou."

"Yeah, I know." Lou bites a knuckle, considering. "You don't think he'll—*do* anything, do you? To himself?"

"No." Bruce looks unsure.

"How about Arrowhead?"

"No." Very sure. "He's totally committed to the project, that I know. His performance is still perfect," which is simple truth. Michael's work is excellent, his findings impeccable; essential. It is his refuge; he clings to it as fiercely and stubbornly as he clings to Halloran.

Bruce, and Lou, and all the Lous, are meeting today, to decide the next step in the separation process. The tandem quarters will be vacated; each handler—how empty the title sounds now!—will be put on a ward; the glassheads will be housed in new quarters, with no memories in their walls or under their beds. This move will just be done, no discussion, no chance of input or hysterics or tantrums. Better for everyone, they tell each other solemnly. For them, too, but they don't say it. This daily tragedy is wearing everybody down.

The move is a success, with one exception.

"No," Michael says, with the simplicity of imminent violence. "Nope," hand on the door, very calm. "No, she's not moving anywhere, I don't care who decided, I don't care about anything. She's staying right here and you can go tell Bruce to fuck himself." And the door closes. Bruce is consulted. He says, Let them be for today and we'll think of something else tomorrow.

What they think of is ways to mollify the other teams. Halloran is not moved. Arrowhead is, at bedrock, *the* project, essential. Everything else is a tangent. If consistent, outstanding results are obtained—as they are—then ways can be found, any ways, to keep them coming; the glasshead project in toto is not such a crushing success, what with the first batch proving unsuitable and then unusable, that they can afford to tamper with that which produces its only reason for existing, its reason, to be crude, for any budget at all. Without Arrowhead they can all fold up their tents tomorrow. And the data in itself is so compelling that it is unthinkable that the project not continue.

So Halloran stays.

A conversation tires her; her feet swell and deflate, swell and deflate, with grim comic regularity; her lips bleed, her gums. She plays Transplant, very loud, tells Michael she wishes she could jack right into the music so as to feel it, literally, in her bones. She lets him do almost everything for her, when he is there; it calms and pleases him, as much as he can be pleased, anymore. When they make love he holds her like china, like thinnest crystal that a thought could shatter. They spend a lot of time in tears.

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"Oh this is old," she whispers, stroking his back as he lies atop her. "This is just getting so old."

There is no answer to that, so he gives none. He is too tired even to cry, or pound fists, or scream that their treatments are shit, shit! He feels her heart beat. It seems so strong. How can anyone who looks so sick have such a robust heartbeat? Thank God for it. Let it beat forever, till he and all the world is dust.

"Know what?"

"What?"

"Know what I'd like to do, more than anything?"

He raises himself from her, moves to his side, cradles her that way. "What would you like to do?"

"Arrowhead."

The word makes a silence. Vacuum. Each knows what the other is thinking.

Finally, Michael: "It's a neurological strain. A *big* strain. You might—it could hurt you."

She laughs, not sarcastically, with genuine humor. "What a tragedy *that* would be."

More silence.

"There isn't a lot left," she says, very gently, "that I can do. This," running her hand down his body, her touch ethereal. "And that. Just one. Just one ride."

He doesn't answer. He can't answer. Anything he says would be cruel. She puts her hand on his cheek, strokes his skin, the blond stubble. There is a lot she could say, many things: If you love me—one last chance—last favor. She would rather die, and for her it is not an academic pronouncement, than say those things, any of those things.

"All I care about," he says finally, his voice deeper than she has ever heard it, "is that I don't want to be a part of something that hurts you. But I guess it's already too late, isn't it?"

For her, there is no answer to that.

Much later: "You really want to do it?"

He can feel her nod in the dark.

"*Shit.*"

"Okay," Michael says, for the tenth time. "It'll take me a couple minutes to get there, get plugged in. I'll get going, and then this—" indicating a red LED "—will pulse. You jack in then. Okay?"

"Please, Mister," in a little girl's voice, undertone of pure delight, "how do you work this thing?"

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry." He is smiling too, finally. "Fasten your seat-

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belt, then." She is pale with excitement, back almost painfully rigid, his denim cap jaunty on her head. When he kisses her, he tastes the coppery flavor of blood. He leaves, to march down the hall like Ghenghis Khan.

Halloran's heart is thrashing as she jacks in, to the accompaniment of the LED. She feels Michael at once, a strong presence, then—go.

The slow dazzle of the slipstream night, rushing over her like black water, rich phosphorescence, things, passing, the alien perfection of Arrowhead, the flow and flower of things whose names she knows but now cannot fathom or try, the sense of flying, literal arrowhead splicing near to far, here to there, cutting, riding, past the farthest edge—it is wonder beyond dreams, more than she could have wished, for either of them. Worth everything, every second of every pain, every impatience and disappointment, of the last two years. She does not think these things in words, or terms; the concept of rightness unfolds, origami, as she flies, and if she could spare the second she would nod Yes, that's so.

Michael, beside her, feels this rightness too; on his own or as a gift from her, he cannot tell, would not bother making the distinction. She is in ecstasy; she is inside him, they are both inside Arrowhead. He could ride this way forever, world without end.

They find out, of course, Bruce and the others; almost at once. There is a warning monitor that is made to detect just this thing. They are in the tandem quarters, they forcibly unplug her. Michael feels her leaving, the abrupt disunity, and eyes-open screams, hands splayed across the air, as Arrowhead gives a lurch. As soon as she is out of the system she collapses. Grinning.

Bruce teeters on the edge of speechlessness. One assistant says, voice loud with disbelief, "Do you have any idea what you've just done to yourself? Do you know what's—"

"No," she corrects, from the bottom of the tunnel, faces ringing her like people looking down a manhole. "No, *you* have no idea."

South Carolina is a lot farther away than Proxima Centauri. ●

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LIZAVETA

by Gregory Frost

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As he strolled with his comrades along the fogbound filthy walk, Sergei Zarubkin wondered if the war with the Japanese were to blame for the eruptions of violence spreading through Moscow. The war had become a travesty in the failure of so vast a nation as Russia to devastate the upstart Orientals. Added to that, the hot August temperatures this year had inflamed tempers, fueled fights, even murders . . : as for instance last night in the Yama.

The Yama: the Pit, Moscow's Red Light District. Three blocks of ornate houses, with windows trimmed in carved scrollwork and lace curtains; where a woman cost three rubles for one hour of her time, ten rubles for a night; where boys of high-standing became men. But that quiet tradition had been suspended—because this night the Yama lay in darkness, in absolute stillness, with the houses all looted, their bright scrollwork smashed, lace curtains charred and hanging in tatters. All the whores had been beaten, killed, or driven out. And that was why four soldiers had to come here to the cesspool called Khitrovka Market in search of women for the night.

Zarubkin took a swig from the bottle of Smirnov's he carried, then passed it to Gladykin on his right, who lifted it, hailed it as a national treasure, and drank his fill before passing it on to Getz. From Zarubkin's left, Vanya handed him another bottle—he must have had it hidden inside his greatcoat. Zarubkin smiled to him, but recalled for an instant Vanya's despairing face, lit by the fires all around, last night in the Yama. Dragoons not unlike him had initiated the destruction: Two fools who decided they had been cheated out of three rubles by some madam; two men who had, because of tension and heat, impotency and drink, managed to stir a civilian army into looting and killing. Tonight those same civilians ran amok somewhere in Moscow, violence begetting violence. The disease of the mob had turned away from the whores, reshaping into something with a more sinister purpose: Zhidov, the new target. Jews.

Zarubkin, a captain in the Czar's guards, looked past his friends and into the fog. Why, he wondered, hadn't the zealots burned this pestilential place instead of the Yama? Even the police tended to avoid Khitrovka Market. The thick blanket of fog tonight hid much of the district's rot, but it carried the intense stench of the place, so that Zarubkin felt smeared with rheum. He took a hard pull from Vanya's bottle, then snarled, "To hell with the righteous citizens." It was they, after all, who had forced him and his friends to come here. Anywhere but where the mob was on this night off. Let those on duty look into the face of Hell. Not him, not two nights in a row.

Gladykin laughed and slapped his shoulder. "To hell with the righteous," he agreed, then added, "May they all burn for every one of us who

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carries crabs out of here tonight." And "Crabs!" cried Vanya, "To the crabs!"

They all drank to the health of lice and strode on. Their boots clopped like horses' hooves on the cobblestones in the dark.

Whatever evil had really dwelled in "The Pit," it hardly compared with Khitrovka. Here, as Zarubkin had learned from the heartfelt writings of Gilyarovski, the young girls were called *tyetki* when they advanced, at the age of ten or eleven, from begging to prostitution. Many had become alcoholics by that point, although their pimps—their "cats"—generally watered down the vodka. Few survived past their fourteenth year. Gilyarovski had found none in his search through the rubble. Because of two uniformed idiots, those hapless children would now have to match their indecent skills against professional prostitutes—the desperate survivors of last night's conflagration. How many of each, Zarubkin wondered, lurked in the fog ahead?

As the four men neared the heart of Khitrovka, beggars began to emerge from the darkness. The beggars choked the houses round about—thousands of soiled bodies wedged into a few blocks of space. Some were mutilated or deformed, unable to work. Some carried the corpses of babies in their arms as an appeal for sympathy in the form of coins even though with the child dead they had one less problem in their lives. Often the dead babies weren't even their own.

The sight of four large, well-fed guards in uniform sent most of the beggars scurrying back into shadow, the fog swirling after them. The four men walked on toward the building called Peresylny where the prostitutes had most likely found a haven. As he passed a curbstone fire, Zarubkin sensed someone watching him. The watcher turned out to be a scrawny creature warming its hands over the fire where another wretch, oblivious of him, cooked up a "dog's mess" of sausage and onions in a rusty iron pot. The creature staring so boldly was by appearances an ancient dwarf. The fire between his fingers revealed skin like parchment and a nearly hairless head that looked to have been smashed in on one side. The dwarf sneered at him, revealing brown and broken stubs, and gaps in the gums, like a child in the process of losing his baby teeth. His nose looked like a rotting carrot. By a trick of sound, the sizzle of the "dog's mess" seemed to emanate from the dwarf. Zarubkin looked away. He made himself relax, and discovered that his hand had closed over the butt of his revolver.

At that moment Gladykin announced, "I think it's time we separated, gentlemen. Together, we're going to scare off our nightingales. After last night the *tyetki,* I'm sure, expect us to burn their little world to the ground." He gestured at the fog, laughing as if to say that no sane man would waste his energy on such a task.

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"All right," Getz agreed, "see you all inside Peresylny." Abruptly, he broke away from them and went up another street. They heard him walking long after he was lost to sight. Gladykin gave Zarubkin a wink, then turned and followed Getz like a bird in formation. "Later, my friend," his voice carried back. Zarubkin was going to share a humorous reply with Vanya, but he found that Vanya had quietly taken his leave, too. Zarubkin slowed and glanced around. Of the four of them, he had least wanted to venture on his own in this place, though soldiers would be quite safe. Especially, as Gladykin had said, after last night.

Pinpoints of light here and there revealed clusters of people, but the fog drank their voices and turned them into primeval lumps. The dwarf at curbside had vanished. Maybe the fog had swallowed him, too.

Zarubkin turned toward Peresylny, and a tall figure rushed toward him from a doorway on his left. He leaned away, his bottle held at the ready to smash down. Hands in fingerless lace gloves reached out for him. Delicate fingers closed on his wrist, over the neck of the bottle, pulling with the weight of a single body. The darkness swished. To his surprise, a woman pushed herself up against him. She stared into his face for a moment, her terror quite naked; then she glanced past him, all around, nervously.

Zarubkin guessed her age to be twenty-five. Vodka had puffed the skin beneath her eyes, adding some premature years there, but had not yet swelled her body or burst the capillaries in her nose. She was lean, her cheeks prominent and proud, her body like a whip in the dark décolleté dress that had blended with the fog. Her hair—it looked perhaps auburn—hung in disarray at her throat but also bore the signs of a coiffure not many days old.

When her attention returned to him he saw again the unrestrained terror in her dark eyes. What was after her in the fog? He could not help glancing around himself. Whoever wanted her, they would doubtless be less inclined to trouble one of the Czar's guard. Had she recognized that as he passed by? Was that why she had scurried to him? He smiled reassuringly, said, "Would you care for some vodka? It's not watered down—it's good Smirnov."

A smile trembled desperately on her lips, made little creases in her cheeks and revealed good white teeth. Of course, he realized then, this girl was from the Yama. No wonder she was terrified: in this place she played the part of the lamb in a field packed with wolves.

She drew nearer, like an intimate companion. "You're very kind, thank you." She took his bottle and drank deeply. He saw her looking over it into the fog once more, eyes searching, always moving.

Vodka glistened on her lips as she returned the bottle to him. Then she asked, "Would you stay the night with me, soldier?"

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This nonplussed him: It was supposed to be his question to her, after all. As a Yama whore, she ought to have recognized the proprieties of their encounter. He politely took back his vodka.

She seemed to sense his withdrawal from the proposal. "Look," she said and dug fervidly into a small purse. "I have a ticket." She held up a yellow card. "Government approval."

He hesitated, but there was something about her, about her predicament, that he wanted to know. "Yes, all right," he said, found her staring out into the night again. She had made enemies here—probably, he thought, by trying to push her polished manners on the denizens. In Khitrovka she could disappear and no one might ever look for her. What was one whore more or less afloat in the stinking Yauza? She had to be scared to be so forward as to express *her* wants. The problem, as he saw it, lay in the fact that he had only enough money for an hour of her time if he was going to rejoin his friends for more drinking. In some embarrassment, he explained this. The woman started to laugh, very near hysteria. "Three rubles?" she said and pressed tightly against him. "My darling captain, with three rubles you can have me for life."

Zarubkin merely gaped. He had paid for a woman twice before, and he knew enough to know that this was not the way it was supposed to go. Then she buried her face against his collar and whispered, "Please stay with me this night, fair captain. Don't leave me to this . . . this horror."

She smelled of soap, and perfumed French soap at that. He wondered how so delicate a scent had survived a day amidst the ordure of the Market. The whore's breast rubbed against the back of his hand where he held the bottle to his chest. Her scent, her looks, her mystery aroused him. "Of course," he lied. "Of course I'll stay. Where do you live?"

The small room contained three beds wedged in around a scarred and warped washstand displaying a cracked ceramic pitcher and a brass oil lamp. Two of the beds had been stripped, and the whore assured him the other occupants would not be returning. "They fled the city this morning, Neva and Olenka. The landlords don't know that yet. I would have gone with them . . . they didn't wait." She hid her face where she could regain her composure. "I'm sorry. You delight that we're alone of course." She drew back the covers. Blotches and smears the color of rust stained the sheets but she swore that no vermin hid in the bedding. The business side of her came out as she undressed, her manner mechanical, any hints of nervous tension coming only at the end, as she removed the last of her shiny underclothes. Next she helped him remove his own clothing, her fingers quick but twitchy.

They lay down together. Her thin body shivered, but she smiled

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bravely, prepared to endure anything to have him. He found her peculiar forlornness arousing, and he pulled her to him. She stopped him briefly.

"My name is Lizaveta Ostrov," she said.

"I'm Zarubkin."

She looked questioningly into his eyes.

"Sergei," he added in compliance.

"Sergei," she replied flatly, and opened to him at last.

The warmth of the vodka seemed to shoot through him. Her love-making had urgency, as if she must race to the end before the whole world burst apart. It defied Zarubkin's knowledge of whores: usually, they feigned vague interest in their partner, and some not even that. He had always seen through the shallow façade and not cared. This woman treated him like a drink of water in the desert, or a last meal before execution. They made love three times in as many hours and polished off Vanya's bottle of vodka as well. She retrieved a bottle of her own from a small cupboard beneath the crooked window, crawling across the two other beds to get it. As she climbed back into bed and handed it to him, she apologized, "It's not as strong as yours. In the house in the Yama, the madam didn't wish for us to get so drunk as to forget to collect our fees."

"You'd prefer I paid you now, I understand."

The fright reappeared in her eyes. "Don't—don't pay until you leave. Not before day."

"What is it, is your 'cat' looking for you?"

She shook her head. "I represent myself here. Now that so many others have come, it's become more difficult. . . ."

He had to ponder that before the astonishing meaning became clear. "You came here *before* the Yama burned? Dear God, why? A beautiful woman like you, with your manners, your grace—"

"Oh, I did well. I learned very quickly, even though I'd arrived upon it so late, as a trade. You enjoy me?"

"Very much—I mean, three times is . . ." He looked around to cover his embarrassment. Her boldness in asking—that was like the whores he had known. "You became a prostitute recently then. Why did you choose—I mean, of all things to do with your life?"

"You're beside your whore this very minute—don't make it sound so foul, captain."

"I didn't mean—all right, yes, I suppose I did." He studied the creases in the sheet between his elbows.

Softly, Lizaveta said, "I was a teacher," and he glanced up. Her gaze had become distant. She drank long from the bottle of weak Smirnov's. "I loved children. I did." Slowly, she lay back beside him with her head

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against his shoulder. Her toes rested on the tops of his feet. She was nearly his height.

Zarubkin had intended to leave shortly, certain that his friends would tire of waiting and go off without him. Now he realized he would not be with them. He had asked his other whores to tell him about their lives, mildly curious. But the woman Lizaveta Ostrov did not act like any whore he had known. Her pose—if it was a pose—had him desiring the explication of her life as much as he had desired the union with her body. He really did want to know what had driven her here. What lay in the fog.

At first, when he asked, he thought she would not say anything. Then she sighed, leaned up and kissed him. "You'll stay with me, then?" There was, implicit in the question, the revelation that she had known his earlier lie for what it was.

"I'll stay. This time I swear I will, till light."

She covered her eyes with one hand, beneath which her lips trembled. The glistening of a tear crawled out into sight.

Unwilling to commit himself to her further, Zarubkin waited and drank, drank and waited. When she began to speak, it was so soft that she caught him completely off guard. She was telling him her story, and he had to ask her to begin again.

"When I graduated from the University," she said, "I was equipped to teach but could find no jobs in Moscow, so I returned to the University in the hope of inquiring after a job there. I should have done that at first, right away, because by then I think I must have been the last person in all the city to ask. What they gave me instead of a job was a list of places that needed teachers, and it wasn't a large list. A handful of jobs, all in distant places, too. Only one of them lay in the south, near the Kazakh border, in the foothills of the Urals. It sounded very lovely—warm and inviting—compared to the chill of Moscow, or of such places as Zhigansk and Obdorosk, which were among the remaining choices. I have always desired warmth, probably from having lived a cold childhood. We always want the other thing, the thing we don't have—don't you find people to be very polar in this way? I wrote a letter to the people petitioning, saying that I would take the job of teacher in their village, called Devashgorod. Next I waited—almost a month before the village replied. They sent back a letter of acceptance with directions on how to reach there.

"I left right away. A train took me to Orenburg, which was the closest civilized place to my new home, and that nearly a hundred kilometers away. I located a troika going into the Urals from there, a coach of odd travelers, and I secured a place on board, next to a man, a Persian I believe, just arrived from the Caspian Sea. He smelled of an alien sweet-

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ness and his Russian was terrible, but he smiled broadly, openly, with huge white teeth, whenever I looked his way. The others in the troika seemed to take offense at his presence and scorned me for befriending him even that little bit. No one spoke to me really the whole first day of the journey. I didn't care. I leaned back and watched the incredible scenery float by—the rolling steppes, whole hillsides covered in flowers, the mountains growing always larger and more distinct. By that second day the majority of the passengers had reached their various destinations or had gotten off at a crossroad to take a different path. Only three people remained: myself, the Persian, and a man who was going with the driver to some place on the Tobol River. 'This is old country,' he said to me. Left alone with us, I suppose he no longer felt the need to pretend indifference. He claimed this place we traveled through belonged to the oldest civilizations in the world. Time, he said, had hardly touched the land there. He could not understand why someone such as I traveled alone in such a place. So I told him about my teaching position, my first one. Where? In Devashgorod.

"The traveler to Tobol hadn't heard of it but the Persian beside me was plainly disturbed by the name. His faced pinched, and it furrowed like a plowed field, and he clutched my hand, saying, 'Must you go? Lady, must you go?' I answered that I had to, yes, or have no employment and a bad record. From that moment on, I became the outcast and he, the dark man, avoided me while the other man laughed contemptuously and called him a 'superstitious peasant,' but also quickly turned to reverie. Shortly after that he feigned sleep. Eventually, the wagon deposited me and my trunk at the intersection with the Devashgorod Road.

"A one-horse cart arrived. The driver greeted me with a great wave. He stood up in the cart, a huge man with long, shiny black hair and a heavy mustache. He had the cheeks of a Kazakh that looked set in place with a trowel. He wore a bright peasant shirt and rough trousers tucked into high boots, very worn. His name was Trifon, a curious name, I thought. As we drove to his village, he explained that he was the *ataman,* which is the chieftain of sorts, but with religious as well as judiciary duties. Every Kazaki village had an *ataman,* he informed me.

"The road took us up into the true foothills of the Urals. Peaks still had snow on them in May. The road became a trail, barely more than two ruts in the high grass. I experienced the moment that comes upon the threshold of a new life—of fear and doubt and a tingling excitement.

"The wagon bounced over the top of a ridge and there below me lay Devashgorod. Like a collection of dollhouses, quite lovely, colorful, it was a scene of utter serenity—or very nearly so. At the edge of the village nearest the road below us there was a great pit grown over by grass and flowers. From above I could look right down into that pit, and I found

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myself staring at the peaked roof of a house. It looked not very old, and I was amazed. 'What happened there?' I asked. Trifon replied quickly, 'Terrible. An earthquake, the ground opened up, the house was simply devoured by the earth. Most terrible day for our village. But here, look,' he said and pointed to a grove of fir trees nearby, where they had built their schoolhouse—no more than a shack really. 'That is where you will teach.' Trifon clapped his hands, just like a chieftain denying further discussion, and down into the valley we went."

Lizaveta paused to take a long pull from her watered vodka.

Puzzled somewhat, Zarubkin asked her, "But how did this drive you into whoring? Did Trifon rape—attack you?"

She laughed, dribbling a little vodka. "Oh, dear captain, no. As if such a thing would make you want more of it! I will tell you, it's coming, but let me do it naturally, please." She hugged against him to win his patience. Outside, someone shouted an angry string of invectives and someone else told him to shut up. Lizaveta ignored the noise and said, "Listen now. I began my teaching the next day. A local family called Shaldin took me in. They had a farm and a big house, and Trifon had prearranged everything with them. They had a son and a daughter who had each been schooled for some years. From them I learned of how my predecessor had approached teaching and some of the names of the students, the ones who were their friends. The daughter, Larissa, warned me to watch out for a boy named Akaky. He was apparently the ringleader for trouble. In all, only twenty-two students attended, a fact which hinted that there must be families who chose not to send their children, who taught them at home if at all, but who did not want them to know of the 'other world.'

"Early in the morning, before the children would arrive, I went to the schoolhouse. There I found stacks of papers and notebooks left by my predecessor. Dust coated the stacks and the desktop. I wondered how long the children had been without a teacher.

"While I finished cleaning off this area, the children began to file in. Most of them were shy, a bit afraid of me. Then, from outside, there came loud jeering, a teasing chorus of voices. I went to the doorway. At my appearance, they all fell silent and moved off—a dozen or so children. At first I thought they had been picking on an old man, but in a moment I saw that the old man was in fact a child, a victim of a terrible, withering disease that had made him age prematurely. I had heard of this, but never had I seen so pitiable a sight.

"He stood in a sort of hunch, as if the disease were pulling his body in upon itself. His head seemed too heavy for his neck. The purple veins showed under his skull, which was almost hairless. His skin had that quality of transparency that an onion has. Awful. His cold, bird-like eyes glared at me, and he hobbled past, still staring at me, wheezing as he

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climbed through the door, his right hand crippled up and pressed against his side. I could not believe the cruelty of these children, that they could openly taunt such an unfortunate. I resolved to change that if I accomplished nothing else. Children afflicted by this disease rarely live more than ten years, and I wanted above all to let this boy enjoy what time he had left.

"Once the children had taken their seats, I asked them each to tell me their names and how far they had advanced in their learning. When the time came for the wizened little boy, he refused to speak and just stared with his hard eyes straight ahead, as if he were deaf. I thought here was a poor victim, so harassed that he distrusted even me. I asked that someone tell me about him. Larissa Shaldin stood up. She made no sound, but the boy seemed to sense where she stood behind him. 'That is Akaky,' she told me in an incomprehensibly bitter tone. 'He rejects what you teach him and will continue to, no matter how hard you try. His family even despise him for—' she stopped and looked around herself '—for shunning everything.'

" 'Why do you despise him, though?' And, though I addressed her, it was a question to the whole classroom. Larissa became dismayed by the question and sat down. Someone more daring called out from the back, 'You can see why—just look at him!' This engendered snickers from around the room. I saw that I couldn't carry the argument further without terribly embarrassing the child, so I left it at that and turned to instruction, working on their alphabets and handwriting skills. They knew barely half their letters. My predecessor had not been very qualified for her duties, it seemed.

"That evening I knocked on Larissa's door and went in to apologize for singling her out, which I hadn't meant to do. She sat on her bed in her undergarments and wouldn't look at me until I sat beside her. 'Child,' I said to her, 'you can't treat an unfortunate that way. It's morally wrong.'

" 'An unfortunate?' she replied. Again virulence shot through her words. 'Akaky? He's everything he deserves to be, everything. Death would do us a service to take him.' She stopped speaking but her face expressed how much more she could have said. Her eyes moistened from this contained anger and she jerked her head away. 'You're just the same as the other one. You come here with your ideas about how things are. Everywhere is not like here. Please, I'm warning you now—let Akaky alone. Don't try to help him.'

" 'But that's ridiculous, child. Why shouldn't—'

" 'Do houses sink into the ground in your Moscow? Does the earth open up and devour people?' After that outburst she refused to say anything further. Her cheeks burned as if she were ashamed to have said any of this. I squeezed her hand quite uncomprehendingly and then left, think-

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ing that her family must have put such ideas into her head. I could not imagine why. Had they branded him an outcast because of his disease? Did they think him contagious? Or were these people so backwards in their thinking that they saw such physical calamity as a curse from God, a mark of evil? Questions such as that kept me awake a long time.

"The next morning, Larissa's father reinforced them for me. He confronted me in the hallway, blocking my way to the door. He said that, while he prided himself on doing his part for the village, there were rules in his house and one of these was that I was never to enter the children's bedrooms. I didn't know what to say. He went on, asking rhetorically, 'How would it have seemed if you had gone into my son's room last night to speak with him?'

"I answered that such a thing would have been unseemly without a doubt, but I added, 'Nevertheless, your son is but thirteen, sir.'

" 'Well, and just so,' was his reply as though I had agreed with him. 'An impressionable age. And he is already infatuated with you. You didn't know? He's a romantic boy, my little Vald. He would mistake your attentions. Or he might think that he, too, had the right to pass into other people's bedrooms at night—his sister's for instance.'

"I could not believe this argument. Nevertheless, I deferred. I was, after all, a guest. But Shaldin could not leave the matter there. He went on, 'Just remember, madam, you may be the teacher in the school, but here I make the rules and it is only proper that you adjust to them. After all, what do we know of you, or you know of any of us?"

" 'Very little,' I replied, 'but I know enough to see now that this is in some way connected to the incident with the child, Akaky.'

"I had known nothing of the sort, but the urge to say that seized me. Shaldin actually blanched as if I had uttered blasphemy. Then he pushed past me and went out of the house, slamming the door. The entire family must have heard the argument. The echo of the closing door banged all around the upstairs.

"I had no doubt now that Shaldin had forbidden any talk of the child in his house. Now I suspected there might be a blood feud between families involved. Everyone knows how strong are blood ties among the Kazaki. I've heard of disputes that lasted through generations, when the actual cause had been forgotten or even repaired. On the weight of that assessment alone, I determined to go see Akaky's family that afternoon.

"When the day's lessons had been completed, the children went off to help with family chores. There is always work in the fields and at home. I kept Akaky after all the others had gone, and I didn't tell him until then what I wanted of him. He did not even blink at my demand to see his family. That wrinkled mask of hatred became, if possible, more disdainful. I was struck with an extraordinary sense that all of this had

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happened before, that I was repeating the actions of my predecessor. The child climbed off his stool and shuffled out of the schoolhouse. I hurried after him, leaving my papers and things behind.

"I can remember my eyes stinging from the humid heat of the day as I hiked after him. I took to holding my hair off my neck and unbuttoned the collar of my blouse. The light breeze helped somewhat. Keeping up with Akaky proved no trouble despite my lace-up boots, which were hardly designed for rough hills. We passed sheep and goats—the stink of the goats clung with a particular tenacity to the steamy air. It pervaded my clothes."

The captain laughed. "There's surely no stink like it," he agreed, and passed the bottle back to her. She rose up to take a drink, and he saw her profile against the vague light of the window—saw the sparkle of moisture on her lips. She was, he reminded himself, really very lovely. In the street below Peresylny, he heard feet clatter on the cobblestones, and more shouting—spewed cries that sounded like alarms. He climbed past her, across the beds as she had done, and stared down through the grimy window. Fires spotted the night, but except for these small enclaves he could see nothing of Khitrovka no matter how he strained. The footsteps ran on, fading away.

Behind him, Lizaveta said, "It's like this here every night. Sometimes you hear it and you know someone's being murdered."

Zarubkin accepted that he would learn nothing from his watch and crawled back beside her. The bottle touched his hip, cold. He flinched and took it from her, took a drink, then settled back to listen to her. "You were going to his house," he prompted.

"Akaky's house," she said, "it was a hut actually. They had a large pen built on one side of it, but the animals inside were scrawny things. We had reached a rise slightly above the hut and as we descended, four people emerged from the doorway and stood in a row outside, waiting. They must have been watching for us. Akaky went up to his father and stopped. The child shrank into himself more than ever and glanced up at his father without raising his head. Then he pushed past his family and went inside. Only then did they all turn their attention to me—all staring with that same dark malignity the boy had. I tried to excuse their hostility by telling myself they must have felt cursed by his affliction. I told them who I was and that I was offering to help both the boy and them.

"The father snorted at me. 'Help us?' he said. 'You wish to help us, then kill that boy. You'll be helping the whole village *and* yourself, lady teacher.'

"I couldn't believe what I heard. The man saw this, too, but all he did was shake his head sadly. Then he told me I was like the others, and

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that perhaps the next one would have a chance. 'Maybe by then the boy will use himself up,' he remarked. 'Maybe he'll use himself up on you.' Then he told me to go away. I turned to his wife, but she refused to look at me. His older sister—a girl who should have been married by then in that village—eyed me askance, as if daring me to try and address her. The grandmother beside her was the only one showing any sympathy in her face. Maybe she had traveled or at least understood that a world existed beyond Devashgorod. She said, 'Best you should teach those who need your gifts.' I thought then, my God, she could be Akaky's *wife,* he looks so ancient. The father inserted himself between us and repeated his order that I leave. What choice did I have?

"That evening no one in the Shaldin household said more than a few words to me, and even then they would not meet my eyes. Larissa's brother—the one who supposedly had a fondness for me—actually fled to his room when I encountered him on the stairs.

"I lay in bed that night, finding sleep impossible for hours. When I did finally drift off, I had vivid dreams. The sunken house had been resurrected, and I was walking through it, down wainscoted hallways. Ahead of me, doors on both sides of the halls swung open and closed.

"As I drifted along, I thought I heard a voice softly call my name. Drawn toward it, I waited for that door to open to me, then passed through it into a small room, the walls papered in burgundy, the curtains of white lace.

"A woman stood there. I thought at first that she must be a grandmother, but oddly, she wore clothes not unlike mine, clothes that a young woman would wear. The curtain fluttered around her. 'Don't give in to him,' she said. 'He'll eat your life up to survive. Look at me.' She turned more toward me, and I saw that her blouse below the collar shone with a wet darkness and seemed to be stuffed into a depression between her breasts, a hole. She might have said more, but the curtain came to life like a serpent. It wound around her throat and dragged her off her feet. I took a step toward her, but she held up her hand for me to stay away. Then the curtain snapped and she crashed back through the window. Beams of shadow, like an infernal opposite to sunlight, flooded the room. The floor splintered beneath me, and I dropped down into a pit.

"I awoke in my own room in the Shaldin house. The bedclothes stuck to me as I sat up, and I pushed them aside. My pulse raced like a horse. I threw off a great shiver. With the lamp turned up, I sat against the pillows and thought over the dream. The woman—I knew that she had been my predecessor at the school. What had he done to her, how had she been made to age like that? Akaky's grandmother came to mind. What if she were no older? The more I thought about this, the less it made sense to me. It was, I reminded myself, no more than a dream,

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which had conveniently assembled the things that were most unusual about the village into a narrative, but not a coherent reality. Feeling utterly foolish, I crawled back beneath the covers and went back to sleep; but I left the lamp burning brightly. I had no further dreams then that I remember.

"The child did not appear at the school that day, and another of the children informed me that Akaky had been too weak to come in today. The whole of the morning went uneventfully. In the afternoon, as I was returning home, I saw Trifon. He asked me how I found my new job, and I told him that it was going well, that the children needed a great deal of assistance because the last teacher had not done her work properly. 'She was a weaker vessel than you,' he replied, 'but we shouldn't judge her too harshly, should we?' It was as though he could read my doubts, or had shared my nightmare. I agreed with him. He told me, 'What she forgot was that not all children *need* special attention, that some are made to learn, and others not. There are children who will refuse to be helped. Though they are only children. You, I believe, understand not to invite problems.' He bid me a good afternoon and went along the road. My hopes sank with that meeting, for I had expected that Trifon would give me answers where the others would not. Now I felt truly lost and a thousand miles away from the world I knew. I went to my room, closed the door, and began to cry. If anyone there heard me, they did not come to see what was the matter. Eventually, I cried myself to sleep.

"Immediately, a dream overtook me, vivid as the night before. At first I didn't know I was dreaming, because I was in my room still. But then I noticed how dark it was outside. The window across the room was open wide, the curtains drawn back. I could see stars for a moment, but then a shape blotted them out. The me in the dream got up and turned up the lamp, then carried it over to the window. The flame reflected me in the glass, but through myself I could see the child, Akaky, floating beyond, more hideous than ever, more withered and malicious. 'Let me in,' he said, 'you must help me.' I stepped back with the lamp, gesturing him through the window. He slid over the sill and settled on the floor. A mist curled over the ledge at his back. He stood hunched, grimacing in pain. I put the lamp down beside the bed and turned back to help him, remembering that he had been too weak to come to school, but he said, 'Lie down.' I found myself obeying him. A part of my mind watched me performing, but the rest of my will had been left outside the dream. He came to the foot of the bed and began picking up the discarded clothes lying there—the ones from the previous day—and my nightgown. Each item he held to his nose and sniffed, like a dog. Then he dropped each one and took another, until he had soiled everything. All the while, his liquid eyes glistened at me. Finally he came along the side of the bed

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and stood beside me. His crippled hand that he kept always curled at his side unfolded over my face. The fingers all ended in long, sharp nails like tiny blades. With his other hand he untied the bow at my throat, then grabbed the blouse and pulled it apart, exposing my breastbone. He turned the hand slowly and the nails hung above me. It no longer appeared deformed in any way. He let his hand descend slowly, savoring the moment. The promise of ecstasy gleamed in his cruel eyes—I've seen it in many lovers since. His hand dropped below my view, and I waited, not breathing, not thinking. Waiting. And then those nails sank into my skin. I went rigid. It was like terrible ice inside me. My back arched away from the bed until I thought it would snap, but I couldn't make myself move to stop him. He sighed, and I could feel him wriggling his fingers down into my heart. That pain—how can I explain the sweet edge it had to it, pain that was almost unbearable pleasure. I began to scream and scream, trying to roll away from his clutch. He laughed—not a child at all, but a fiend. He rose up straighter. His eyes swelled, growing closer until they blotted out everything else."

"When I did wake up, the afternoon sun blinded me, coming in the window from just above the horizon. I got up, but rocked back from dizziness and had to catch my breath before I could stand. These nightmares, I thought, were draining my reserves. I went to the washstand to pour some water and cool myself, and I saw myself in the mirror. Between my breasts was a bruised ring of five tiny white scars. The bruises are gone now, but if I turned the lamp up I could show you the scars. I began to cry when I saw them. A moment later, Shaldin's wife called us all to dinner. I didn't know what to do. Should I tell them? There seemed no point; they would not be more sympathetic now than before. They might drive me from their home. I wiped away my tears and splashed my face, then buttoned and neatened my blouse.

"At dinner, I kept to myself, which seemed to satisfy them all. I must have eaten something, but I don't know what it was. The family made countless covert glances at me. Both children showed concern, but the parents had fear in their eyes. I had no energy left to cope with them, and I excused myself and retired.

"In the hallway outside my room, I heard Shaldin's caustic voice. 'I told Trifon I won't bring this on us,' he said. 'Some other house can have her, some other family can suffer on her account.' I had gone from guest to intrusive enemy. The man blamed me, even though he obviously had known of Akaky's powers beforehand. Why had he said nothing? I cursed him for his cowardice then and slammed my door so that he would know that I had heard.

"Once inside, I went to the window and latched the shutters before closing the window. The air would become stuffy. I hoped it would make

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me uncomfortable, and keep me awake, but it had just the opposite effect, and put me to sleep. But no one came into the room, and no dreams came to trouble me.

"In the morning, I sought out Trifon again. He sat in the corner of the store where they served pastries and tea. When I arrived, he was speaking with some others and his back was to me. I waited a short distance away. The men with Trifon grew uncomfortable and, one by one, they got up and left. He still had not turned to look at me, but he gestured over his shoulder for me to come and join him. I sat down. He took an empty cup and gave me tea. 'What is it?' he asked.

" 'I will know all the things that you didn't tell me the other day.' He pursed his lips, then brushed the crumbs from his mustache. 'What would you know?' I said, 'Akaky.' I needed to say no more than that. Trifon was a huge man, but that name seemed to shrink him. He nodded as if he had long expected this, but he did not speak, so I prodded him further. 'Why do you all tolerate him?'

" 'You know nothing of us, not even as much as you think you do,' he answered. 'We believe in God, yes, but also we believe that when a person is murdered, that soul enters the heart of the murderer to plague him.' I remarked that this was an interesting belief, but of no relevance I could see. 'Not relevant?' he said. 'It's the reason we've let the monster live. It's the reason he is the way he is. His father killed a neighbor—I'm sure it was an accident of emotion, but it happened. And the boy was born within weeks of that. Born evil, cruel, powerful, and desiring nothing more than to ruin himself and his family. The harm that he has done has been directed at them, at no one else. That is how we know whose soul he has, that's why his family lives in shame.'

" 'How can you say he's harmed no one but them? What about the house out there that's sunk in the ground? What about that poor family?'

"Trifon stared at me as if to say I was a fool. 'That was *his* house. That was where *his* family lived. He brought it down.' As if to dismiss me, he shoved his cup away, but I had not finished.

" 'What of my predecessor?' I demanded.

" 'Her? She witnessed the event and fled from us. Nothing happened to her, just as nothing will happen to you. She lost her position. Akaky withdrew afterward, and no one here saw him. His family keeps away still in shame. They told us he had fallen into a trance and would die. We acted on that, believing—Merciful God, hoping for it. He should have died. We sent for you then. Now you're here and Akaky's weaker than before, so let him be, let him rot. Just don't run away in fright or we'll have to send for another teacher. Evil he is, but he won't do anything except frighten you. Especially at the house of Shaldin, because he fears Larissa—her gifts outshine his, and the rest of us. Oh, yes—you see, I

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told you that you knew less than you thought. We all have some powers like his. But we take precautions, and we don't use our gifts frivolously. If we did, we would all look like Akaky. Now you know why we put you there of all places in spite of Shaldin's objections.'

" 'No,' I insisted, 'no, she didn't run away.'

" 'What? Who didn't run away?'

" 'Your last teacher. She's dead. Akaky sucked her life away.'

" 'Rubbish—now you think him too powerful.'

" 'Really?' I said. 'Well, let me tell you, wise *ataman,* the reason I know what Akaky did to the last outsider is that he is doing the same thing to me.' I wanted to show him the marks, the bruises and scars, but the high-necked blouse I had put on to hide them would not let me. He would have denied them, too, I was certain. He had his system of belief, as did the entire village—of witches or devils or whatever they were in Devashgorod. Angrily, I got up and marched out of the shop. I was no demon, nor had my predecessor been. We were something altogether different. We were prey.

"That afternoon I went into the church, as orthodox a church as you'd find in any village. I prayed for my soul, though I feared that I now dwelled somewhere that God did not visit. Afterward I returned to my room in Shaldin's house. My thoughts collided, but as I sat there I spied my trunk at the foot of the bed and I thought that I should obey my instincts and flee. I could steal a cart, but how could I drag the trunk out of here without the whole house knowing of it? The situation had trapped me, do you see, my captain? There was no way to leave and no hope of survival unless I could deal with Akaky. I thought then that perhaps I could make him leave me alone.

"At dinner I said nothing of my intention, but that night I dressed for bed and then opened the window into my room. A cool breeze from off the mountains blew in, and I settled back on the bed to wait. This time I hoped that the cold would keep me awake. For a while I tried to read some Gogol but could not concentrate, so I set it aside, lay back and waited.

"Even with the cold I eventually drifted to the edge of sleep. I might have dozed but it was at that moment that Akaky thumped against the window. Again a mist trailed in behind him. He was grinning. I sat up and said, 'I'll speak with you,' as harshly as I could muster. My tone dismayed him for a moment, but then he sneered and came forward again. 'Lie back,' he said, 'I've no desire to speak with *you.* It's your life I want, not talk.' I fought his control over me, but my body obeyed against my will. Still, I could talk, and I said, 'You burn your own life up, doing this. Stop before you damn yourself.'

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"He laughed, which turned into a cough. 'I burn either way,' he rasped. 'You can help me live a little longer.'

" 'Why not stop, why not rest?' I asked him.

" 'Because I love it too much. What would life be without the burning inside?' And his eyes rolled up in ecstasy as he lost himself in his own fire. In the room, as he did that, the furniture began to rattle and shift. The bed beneath me trembled, creaking. Then Akaky's rheumy eyes settled on me again. 'You can't imagine it,' he said. 'Or if you did, you'd give in to the pleasure with me—only your kind doesn't have the knowledge we do.'

" 'Then why don't the rest burn themselves up, too?' I asked. 'Why aren't all the villagers out devastating their town for the sheer pleasure it brings?'

" 'They're afraid. But I'm tired of talking to you. Be quiet now.' He uncurled that deformed hand of his and it was whole again, the nails glinting as if sharpened. The part of me that he controlled ached for him to insert them again. Terrified even of myself, I tried to roll free of him, but I might have been paralyzed. He undid the bow on my gown, exposing the bruise he had made. Then, behind him, a shape emerged from the shadows. Slender hands closed over his wrist above me and yanked him around. I found myself able to move, and I turned my head to see Larissa there. She whispered sharply in the Kazaki tongue, words I didn't know. What she said must have been a curse of some kind, because he reacted by spitting at her. With his free hand he swung at her face and knocked her against the door. Then he didn't touch her, only looked at her, but somehow this seemed to mash her against the wood of the door. She answered his assault, and he stumbled back a foot. She might have superior powers, but Akaky was willing to use his at a murderous level, which Larissa dared not. I thought of her withered and dried out from saving my life, and I couldn't let that happen.

"Akaky's head swiveled and his teeth creaked. He jerked with his neck and Larissa spun away, smashing against a chair and onto the floor. He seemed to expand, to rise almost to the ceiling. The house groaned and snapped. It must have spun somehow, because I was tossed across my bed.

"Larissa climbed up quickly. Blood was running out of her nose. 'Akaky,' she said, but he shook his head and replied, 'It's too late, you waited. I've new strength, from the teacher, and you shouldn't have picked now to try me, you shouldn't.' He closed the distance between them. I sat up, but reeled with dizziness, and I fell on my side, my face pressed against the cool binding of my book. The house lurched with a bounce. It would sink like the other one, and because of me. I grabbed the volume of Gogol in both hands, and I swung around and smashed it

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down across the back of his wretched skull. The blow drove him across to the door, and I heard something in him crack when he hit it. I thought I had killed him, but when Larissa and I turned him over we saw that only his nose had been broken. She could hardly stand and I made her sit in the chair she had fallen across, while I wiped the blood from her face. Beneath it, she had lines I'd never seen before—she had aged years from that short confrontation. 'He'll come again for you, night after night,' she assured me. 'In each generation here, there's one like him, who does damage until he perishes from his own obsession. Evil is always consumed by its own heat. But never before have there been outsiders. Now the evil will spread to the outside from us.'

" 'The world has evil in it already, Larissa,' I told her.

"She nodded. 'True, but no evil before had your name on its lips.' I considered then finishing what I had started, killing the child. Larissa sensed this and told me that I would be foolish to do so. She believed the myth of her village. Perhaps I had come to as well.

"Larissa sighed, exhausted. I was surprised that no one else had stirred. She must have seen my distant look, because she said, 'They've been kept asleep. Akaky's magic. He wouldn't want to fight us all—it would drain him utterly.'

" 'But why not destroy him like that?' I asked. Here they had what seemed to me the perfect solution to their problem; but Larissa shook her head. 'You don't understand us,' she said. 'He's evil, but he is of us nevertheless. We must tolerate him though we don't want him. In this way he destroys only himself, nothing else.'

" 'Except me,' I pointed out.

" 'Yes,' she agreed. 'He can destroy you. You should never have been allowed here before the village knew for certain that he had perished. And now you must go. I'll take you to the *ataman,* and he'll send you from here tonight.' She left my room to put on her clothes. I changed mine, stuffing my belongings into the trunk. When I came around the bed, Akaky's hand shot out and grabbed my ankle. 'Larissa!' he wheezed. 'I'll murder you. I'll wear you down till you're a rotting corpse.' He clutched my skirts, and dragged himself up me. Blood covered his lips and outlined the stubs of his teeth. I shoved him away, but he hung onto me with those fingers. I tried to reach the door, but he pulled me off balance. I fell, catching myself against the doorknob. Akaky was on his knees. I whirled around and slammed him against the wall. He growled, and his eyes rolled back, and a horrible pain opened in my breast. Akaky was grinning in pain and pleasure combined, his head back, the blood drawing lines up his face now. Frantically, I tore him from me, peeling his tiny hand away, crushing the fingers. He became weaker and more fragile by the moment. He laughed at me then, as if rejoicing in both

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our sufferings. I was not of their village; I could not block him out, and I could not endure this any longer. I slapped him as hard as I could. It was like hitting old, thin plaster. His cheekbone shattered under my hand. That whole side of his face caved in. He hissed, his breath foetid; but his hand went limp and he tumbled back across the chair.

"I stood there, shaking, waiting. If he had moved again, I would have taken something and beaten his head into the floor. Instead, he lay unmoving, as repellant a sight as if I had disinterred a corpse and brought it into my room. The stench of him seemed to fill the room.

"Larissa returned and saw him. In a mad rush I explained what had happened. Horrified, she bent over the chair. 'I think you've killed him,' she said. 'Come on, you have to get away now.' She grabbed my arm and pulled me from the room. I wanted to go back for my trunk but she insisted that someone else would get it. I was not to return to that room.

"Trifon listened to her story morosely. Was it me, I wondered, who shadowed the *ataman*'s thoughts? But no, it was Akaky, for Trifon cursed him and spat. He agreed to hitch up his horses. My trunk was loaded on his wagon and I left Devashgorod in the dead of night, like a criminal, a spy. At the edge of town, Shaldin's house now stood canted to the right, as if the pit that had swallowed the neighboring house was growing, unseen.

"On the way along the road, Trifon handed me some money. 'This is payment for as much of the year as I can afford. You won't have a successor. Not till Akaky is taken care of.'

"I thought, *But he's dead. I've killed him, what of me?* I lost myself in gloom until I saw him. He stood beside the road as we went past. Trifon didn't see him, but I did. I saw the moonlight on his wild eyes, and I turned to watch him hobble into the dust after us. In terror I watched him recede into the night. When we reached the main road, Trifon wanted to leave me, but I wouldn't let him go. I pleaded with him to stay, not to leave me where Akaky could prey upon me. Trifon remained until morning, when he assured me in the sunlight that I was safe. Then he would not be kept there and drove off. His village needed him, he explained. Larissa Shaldin needed him. The troika was due around midday, or so he had claimed. I sat on the trunk, surveying the landscape for that hunched, repulsive shape. The trunk shifted under me, so gently at first that I didn't understand what was happening. Then it shook violently. I jumped up at the instant that the latch burst. The lid flew open so hard that one hinge tore free. Clothing, all that I owned in the world, went spinning up like a fountain. At the center of it, a shape rose up—Akaky. His bleeding mouth drooled. The indented side of his face was purple and black. He scrabbled at me with those claws, but in his blind lunge he fell over the side of the box. I thought: Now is the time to finish him. I

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took a step. Should I kill him with a rock? Then he sprang from the ground, and his sharp fingers reached for my face. He missed but tangled them in my hair. I grabbed his wrist and tore myself free; his arm snapped and he wailed. I turned and ran.

"The troika picked me up later that day and I rode in the safety of the other passengers, saying nothing to them but protected by their presence, or so I hoped. But on the train to Moscow, I saw him outside the window twice, pressed to the glass like a fly on a wall. Where had he gotten the strength to do this? Had he killed someone else, drained their life to pursue me? I could not—did not want to—imagine it. And each time I saw him, he was more decrepit, more horrible. He looked like a mummified corpse, like nothing living. In Moscow I tried to go back to the University, but he sat on a bench by the door, knowing somehow that I would go there. In my despair I contemplated taking my own life, jumping into the river; but I haven't the courage.

"I don't know when I decided at last to go to the Yama. I think I just found myself there, wandering, and I saw the fine houses and realized that Akaky could never imagine I'd go there. It frightened me at first, but the women were kind, and understanding. Most of them had been through the same initial fears. The madam promised me that I had a cultured look that would appeal to her aristocratic clientele. I used most of my money to bribe an officer into getting me a yellow card, and the rest was, as the girls had assured me, just a matter of playing a role. I came to enjoy it. Hardly ever did I go out, but one man wanted a companion for the opera season, and I knew opera where the others did not, so the madam insisted. As I feared, Akaky found me. I saw him as I came from the opera one night, but he would not approach while the man was with me. Like a gnarled stick creature, he hobbled along behind our carriage, following it all the way back to the Yama house.

"I escaped that night, dressed like a beggar, my clothes in a bag. No one paid me any mind and I saw nothing of Akaky. This became my refuge, a shabby room with two other whores; nights I've always had company, but now they've fled. Now I'm trapped in this pestilent hole. I must get out to work, to protect myself, but to go out is to invite Akaky to find me. I drink vodka and hope it will kill me, but it's too weak. All it can do is keep me from dreaming. He'll find me in my dreams. He'll get inside me again." She shivered. "Safety, I learned long ago, is an illusion. None of us is safe. All Moscow isn't big enough to hide me. He'll find me. The filth here feeds a million rats."

Zarubkin thought of the creatures outside in Khitrovka Market. He recalled the hideous dwarf where the sausage had been cooking. Dwarf! He sat up.

In the street something exploded. The lopsided square of the window

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lit up and the shutters rattled. Zarubkin jumped from the bed. Screams echoed from below, reports of gunfire. "What's going on?" he cried. He pressed against the glass. A few vague, scurrying silhouettes were all he could glimpse. Then came the rumbling that became hooves clopping on cobbles. Many horses. He could imagine them, the cavalry, like a wave. Shots sounded in a volley, a string of sound; and when that echo died down, it revealed a growing chant: "Bei zhidov! Bei zhidov!"

Zarubkin hurried to the bed and pulled on his trousers. He leaned back toward the window. Lizaveta sat up as if spellbound by the chanting. "The Jews," she said. Last night the whores, tonight the Jews. Here in Khitrovka lived all the usurers to whom so many of the soldiers owed money. The city, devolving into chaos, would take her captain from her. "No!" she cried. "You can't go, you promised to stay!" She stretched and grabbed his arm to make him look at her.

Footsteps pounded in the hall. Doors slammed open or closed. Zarubkin drew his pistol. A voice shouted his name—it was Vanya—and he answered, "Here!" by reflex, wishing even as he called out that he had kept silent. Lizaveta's hand slid away and he could not meet her gaze.

The door burst open to the whirlwind Vanya, his pistol also drawn. His wide eyes gleamed in the low light from the oil lamp; he looked to Zarubkin like a lost child. "It's a pogrom, Sergei! Come on, they're shooting Jews tonight. It's worse than ever." He glanced at Lizaveta with embarrassment. "Gladykin's already out there, 'for target practice,' he said."

Zarubkin had known Gladykin for over a year—how had he tolerated the cruelty of the fellow for so long? Lizaveta rose, naked, from the bed suddenly and charged at Vanya. "You!" she shouted at him. "Here's a Jewess for you. Start with me."

Vanya's mouth hung open.

"Don't," Zarubkin protested in confusion.

"Here, you foul pig, here's all you could possibly want, both a whore and a Jew, one shot gets you double your prize. Where's your guts, oaf?"

Zarubkin said, "Lizaveta," harshly. She ignored him, closing on Vanya, who was trapped confusedly between two cogent thoughts and could not even move. She took his hand, caressing his wrist, the butt of his gun. "Help me with it," she implored him. A moment later the gun fired. It lit up the room for an instant like a sputtering candle. Lizaveta stumbled away from the horrified Vanya. Zarubkin caught her in his arms. Her head slid along his shoulder, into the crook of his elbow. "What did you do?" Her blood darkened his hand. "Why?"

She looked up at him and said, "Vodka's too slow." Her whole weight suddenly sagged against him.

"But—my God, Sergei, *she* did it," Vanya was stammering. This was

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worse than the deaths of anonymous peasants, this was a woman with a face and a name.

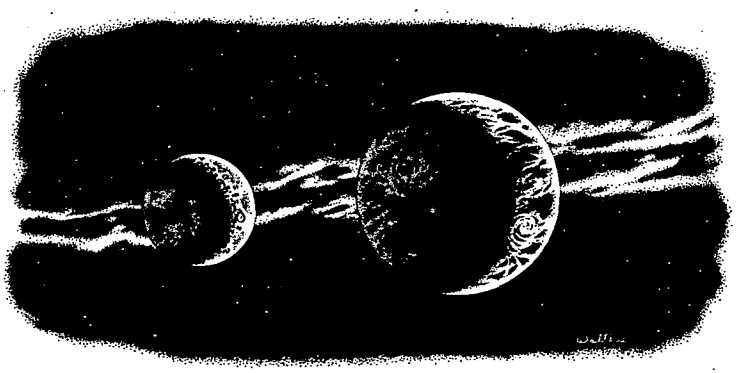
"Yes, Vanya, I know, I know." Zarubkin laid the body on the bed. He knelt beside her and held her hand. "God forgive her this terrible sin," he said finally. "Give her peace."

Outside more shots and cries resounded. The chant bounced from building to building, a cannonade. The air in the room seemed to stir around Zarubkin and he lifted his head. A cool draft brushed his cheek, then passed across the other. It breathed his name. He could barely believe what he understood then. She was with him still. Behind her presence, however, he could feel the smaller one pressing in. She clung to him for a moment, as she had in life. Then he lost the sense of her. He wanted to reach and bring her back. Sadly, he glanced at Vanya. The hairs on his neck crept up.

Vanya's mouth was turned down in a bitter scowl. The gleam in his eyes was no longer that of a scared child. It had become a feverish shine of the most intense hatred Zarubkin had ever seen. Vanya saw him watching and the scowl flattened smugly. Zarubkin had seen that face before. For a moment the pistol wavered in his direction before Vanya reholstered it. Jerkily, he turned away and walked out of the room, leaving the door open.

"Vanya!" Zarubkin cried. A shriek from down the hall answered him. Hastily, he grabbed up the rest of his uniform and charged out. Bullets filled the air like flies.

In Khitrovka Market, the horror had barely begun. ●



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LIVE FROM THE MARS HOTEL

by Allen M. Steele

Although he now lives in rural New Hampshire, Allen M. Steele's home town is Nashville, Tennesee. We think that his roots lend an aura of authenticity to his depiction of the country music milieu in "Live from the Mars Hotel." This story is his first sale to an SF magazine.

art: George Thompson

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Rachel Keaton; program director, WBXL-FM, Boston

I first heard the Mars Hotel while I was working as a jock at KMCY in St. Louis. At that time 'MCY—"Mighty Mickey, the rock sound of St. Louis"—had a progressive contemporary format, and the playlist represented much of the progressive music that was coming out then. The experimental groups from the Far East, the latest British invasion, and of course the acoustic revival. This was the early '20s, y'know, and there was some interesting stuff coming out even before the Mars Hotel appeared, so the timing was right for their first single.

Looking back on it, I think I was one of the first jocks in the country to play it, and that was a matter of being in the right place at the right time. About six months earlier the D.J. who handled the Sunday afternoon acoustic show, Ben Grady, had left 'MCY to become music director at a Los Angeles AOR station. The acoustic revival was just getting started and I had developed a taste for it, the work that was coming out of Nashville and Austin and Muscle Shoals, so I managed to bug Heidi Schlosberg, who was the program director at the time, into letting me take over Ben's show.

It was a lot of fun, because many of these artists were recording on obscure labels, so finding stuff to play was a little like, y'know, exploring new territory. But I kept discovering guys who had skipped back forty, fifty years and were reviving David Bromberg or Johnny Cash or the Earl Scruggs Revue. It was a neat time to be in the music business, since it was finally dredging itself out of the glitzy Hollywood-punk scene where it had been stuck for . . .

I'm sorry. (Laughs.) I'm getting off the subject. Where was I?

Right. Well, I got Ben's old show and renamed it "The Wireless Hour," and one Sunday afternoon in—I guess it was '22, maybe '23—Heidi walked into the air studio with a single in her hand. She had been in that day doing some extra work left over from last week, which included opening all those boxes of records that radio stations get swamped with all week. Well, she had this one single she had just taken out of a box, and the moment I spotted it in her hand, I knew it had to be two things. One, because it wasn't a ceedee and was pressed on old-fashioned vinyl instead, it had to be from some small, destitute label. Second, it had to be good, because she had obviously listened to it in Studio B and thought it was so hot that she had not bothered to master it onto a cart yet.

"Put this on," she says, handing me the disc. "You'll love it!"

I took it out of her hand, saw that it was on a label I had seen a couple of times before, Centennial Park Records, which was a little Nashville company which had started up a couple of years earlier and hadn't put out anything special. The "A" side was an old Bob Dylan, "Knockin' On

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Heaven's Door." The "B" side was "Sea Cruise," the old classic. The band was something called the Mars Hotel.

I gave Heidi this look, because she was into heavy metal and thought, y'know, that Hiroshima was God's gift to pop music. "Trust me," she says. "You'll eat it up." So I cued up the Dylan song and segued it in after the next couple of ad spots. I didn't expect anything special, right?

I dunno. What can I say that hasn't been said before? It was fantastic. I could tell that the band, whoever they were, were only three guys: a vocalist on guitar, a bass player, and somebody on synth doing piano, percussion, and pedal steel. There's been a million bands like that and a million people have done Dylan, most of the time badly. But these guys made "Knockin' On Heaven's Door" sound like they had just written it. Very fresh, stripped-down. Unpretentious. They played like they meant it, you know what I mean?

So I look up and say, "Who are these guys?" Heidi grins at me and asks, "Where do you think they're from?" I glance at the label again and say, "Well, they're obviously from Nashville."

She just shook her head. "No, they're from Mars."

Alan Gass; former station supervisor, Skycorp/Uchu-Hiko Arsia Base, Mars

Well, it's no secret that life at Arsia Base was rough. Always will be rough, or at least until someone gets around to terraforming Mars, which is a wild-eyed fantasy if you ask me. But even if you disregard the sandstorms and the scarcity of water, the extremes of heat and cold and . . . well, just the utter barrenness of that world, it's still a hell of a place to live for any extended period of time.

I guess the worst part was the isolation. When I was station manager we had about fifty men and women living in close quarters in a cluster of fifteen habitat modules, buried just underneath the ground. Most of these folks worked either for Skycorp or the Japanese firm Uchu-Hiko, manufacturing propellant from Martian hydrocarbons in the soil which was later boosted up to the Phobos fuel depot, or were conducting basic research for NASA or NASDA. The minority of us were support personnel, like myself, keeping the place operational.

A lot of us had signed on for Mars work for the chance to explore another planet, but once you got there you found yourself spending most of your time doing stuff that was not much different than if you had volunteered to live underground in Death Valley for two years. For the men working the electrolysis plant, it was a particularly hard, dirty job—working ten or twelve hour shifts, coming back to the base to eat and collapse, then getting up to do it all over again. The researchers didn't have it much easier because their sponsoring companies or gov-

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ernments had gone to considerable expense to send them to Mars and they had to produce a lifetime's worth of work during their two years or risk losing their jobs and reputations.

The base was located in a visually stunning area, the Tharsis region, just south of the equator near the western flank of Arsia Mons. When you went outside there was this giant, dead volcano looming over you, and on a clear day you could just make out the summit of Olympus Mons way off to the northeast. But after a few weeks the novelty would wear off. You'd become used to red rocks and pink skies, and after that what would you have? There was never any time for sightseeing. After awhile you started looking forward to the next big sandstorm, just to watch this giant swirling red curtain coming toward you like the wrath of God. (Laughs.) You wouldn't spend much time watching because the wind could shred your suit in a minute, but at least it was exciting.

Anyway, one night I had just come off my shift in the command module and I was walking back to my bunkhouse through the connecting tunnel, which was called Broadway. I was beat, and I didn't feel like going to the wardroom because I wasn't hungry—not that the food was particularly appetizing anyway—but the way to Module Five took me past the wardroom, Module Three, which we called the Mars Hotel. I had just walked past Three when I heard a guitar being played and someone singing.

I really didn't notice it at first, because I figured it was coming from a tape, but then I heard another guitar joining in and someone else beginning to sing, and then there was an electronic piano chiming in. But the second guy couldn't sing and the piano was a little off-key, and suddenly I realized that I wasn't hearing a tape.

That stopped me in my tracks. I don't know if I can describe that feeling of puzzlement and wonder. It was like a rare bird had just flown down Broadway. I mean, which was stranger? Seeing a rare species, or just seeing a bird in the first place? I backed up a couple of steps, wondering if I was hallucinating, and looked through the open hatch.

Partial transcript of an interview with the Mars Hotel, originally broadcast on NBC's "The Today Show," July 27, 2022 (Note: this interview was taped and edited in advance in order to contract the time differential during Earth-Mars transmissions).

Judith King, host: "So how did you come up with the name for your group?"

Tiny Prozini, lead guitarist: "Um . . . which of us are you asking?"

King: "Any one of you."

Joe Mama, synthesizer player: "During that last nineteen minute delay we thought it over and decided that we wouldn't tell you that we used

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to be called the Mars House of Ill Repute, but the record company made us change it because it was too long to fit on the label."

Gary Smith, bass guitarist: "You shouldn't ask Joe straight questions like that, I'll warn you right now."

Mama (to Prozini): "I told you we should have used a different name. Now we're going to have to answer that question for the rest of our lives."

Prozini: "Look who's talking. No, it's . . . (Laughter). See, there's two reasons. One, the ward room here is called the Mars Hotel. It was once called the Mars Hilton, but it somehow got shortened. Second, there's an old album by the Grateful Dead, whom we all admire, called *From The Mars Hotel.* The ward room is the place where we've always rehearsed, and we've all been influenced one way or another by the Dead, so it sort of came natural."

Smith: "After we started jamming together and people here at the base started coming to listen to us during their off-shifts, they tried to stick us with names."

Mama: "Things like, y'know, the Tharks, the Mike Mars Blues Trio, John Carter and His Bare-Ass Barsoomians . . ."

Smith: "Worse things, when we sounded bad, like Dry-Heaving Sandworms . . ."

Prozini: "Eventually the name that stuck was the Mars Hotel Band, which sort of made us sound like a Ramada Inn lounge act that plays bar mitzvahs. (Laughter). Before long the last part of the name was dropped and we became just, y'know, the Mars Hotel."

King: "I see. And when did you start playing together?""

Mama: "When we got sick of Monopoly."

Prozini: "Please forgive him. The steel plate in his head . . ."

Smith: "Tiny got us started, though he won't admit it."

Prozini: "Oh, I will admit it! I just didn't want to take all the credit."

Mama: "Don't worry. You won't."

Smith: "Oh, hell. If nobody will give you a straight answer, I will! (Laughter.) Tiny and I were shooting the breeze one night in Module Six, our bunkhouse, about the things we missed out here, and one of the things was live music. We're both from New England—he's from Massachusetts, I'm from New Hampshire—and as we talked it turned out that we had both gone to the same places where you could hear live, acoustical music. Bluegrass, blues, folk, rockabilly . . ."

Prozini: "I'm telling the story, so get lost. (Laughter.) And it further turned out that both of us knew how to play guitar. Well, I knew Joe here had a portable Yamaha synthesizer that he had smuggled out here and was hiding in his geology lab . . ."

Mama: "Hey! I told you not to say anything about that!"

Prozini: "Don't worry about it. You're famous now. Anyway, I managed

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to pull some contacts on the Cape and get a couple of guitars shipped to us on the next Mars-bound ship, and once we roped Joe into the combo, we started playing together in the Mars Hotel. And it was just like that."

King: "I see. From what your audience here on Earth has heard so far, you principally cover songs other people have written. Some of them quite old, in fact. Why aren't you writing songs of your own, about Mars?"

Prozini: "Well, uh . . ."

Smith: "We're lazy."(Laughter.)

Mama: "Actually, I'm working on composing an epic twenty-hour opera inspired by old 'Lost In Space' episodes. It's tentatively entitled 'Dr. Smith Unbound.' "

Prozini: "You're a sick man, Joe."

Gary Smith; former bass guitarist, Mars Hotel

That was a pretty ridiculous interview, as I recall it. We had just heard that "Knockin' On Heaven's Door" had cracked the Top Forty in the U.S. and Canada, which we had never dreamed would happen, when we got a request from Skycorp's P.R. office that we do an interview for "The Today Show." We didn't take it seriously because, really, we didn't take *any* of it seriously. "We're music stars? They've got to be kidding!" That sort of thing.

But, deep down inside, when we actually got around to doing the interview, the question that we dreaded the most—although none of us really discussed it—was the one we got about why we weren't writing our own songs. When you watch the tape you can see how we avoided answering that completely, with Joe's remark about "Lost In Space" being the closest we came to giving a reply. But we had answers for that.

One, of course, was that we *liked* playing the old stuff. It was what made us feel good, what took our minds off the hellhole conditions out there and so forth. That's really how the Mars Hotel got started in the first place. None of us aspired to be professional musicians. We didn't even care if we had an audience or not, although we didn't mind when base personnel started gathering in the ward room during our sessions. An audience was something that was thrust upon us, just as fame on Earth was thrust upon us by circumstances beyond our control. It just started with the three of us sitting in the Mars Hotel, trying out things like "Kansas City" or "Police Dog Blues" or "Willie and the Hand Jive"—we were out to entertain ourselves, period.

But secondly—and this was what we didn't want to admit—none of us could write songs worth a damn. Not that we didn't try. At one time or another each of us said, "Hey, I'm going to write a song about Mars," and that person would disappear for a while, think think think, y'know, and come back to the other guys with something. "Here's a song, let's

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try it." And it would always turn out as some hackneyed, pretentious bullshit. Metaphorical nonsense about raging sandstorms and watching Phobos and Deimos rising and how I miss you, my love, now that we're worlds apart. Boring shit, not at all the kind of thing any of us wanted to play.

After a while we just gave up, saying to ourselves and each other, "Screw it, I'd rather do 'Johnny B. Goode' any old day." But our failure to produce anything original that said something about the human condition out there really gnawed on us, though I kept thinking that there had to be a good song somewhere about watching the sun rise over Arsia Mons. But it really bugged Tiny, who was probably the most creative of the three of us, who worshipped Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan and Robert Hunter. I know for a fact, because one of the guys who shared his bunkhouse told me, that he secretly kept attempting to write songs, late at night when he thought no one was watching. I kinda felt sorry for him. It was like masturbation—an ultimately futile attempt to scratch an unscratchable itch.

Alan Gass

After Tiny and Gary got those guitars—I think they bribed Billy DeWolfe, who was one of the regular pilots for the Earth-Mars supply runs, into smuggling them aboard the *Shinseiki*—and they put together the band with Joe, I had to keep after the three of them constantly to do their jobs. Tiny and Gary were both miners—"the Slaves of Mars," we called them—and Joe was a soil analyst in the geology lab, so they all had important industrial functions to fulfill, and it was my job to make sure that Skycorp got its money's worth from them.

As a band, they were pretty funny to watch. Gary looked normal enough, since he would just stand there wearing his bass. But you've seen the pictures of Tiny. He was literally a giant. Six-foot-four, three hundred pounds, almost all of it muscle. Sometimes he wouldn't even bother to sit in a chair, but would lie on the floor with his guitar resting on his huge chest, playing along with his eyes closed.

Joe was the strangest of the bunch. He looked a lot better in the pictures you've seen, if you can believe that. (Laughs). His Japanese and American bloodlines had crossed to produce one freakish-looking individual: narrow, squinty eyes, jug ears, too tall and skinny, with his hair cropped so short that he was almost bald. "Joe Mama" wasn't his real name, but I don't think anyone knew his real name. He would put his mini-synth in his lap and as he'd play—looking like he was typing, the way he held his hands—his eyes would narrow even more and his mouth would hang open and his head bob back and forth as if his neck was made of rubber. If you didn't know better, know that he was an M.I.T.

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graduate with a near-genius level I.Q., you would have sworn he was an idiot.

The funniest thing, though, was how they sounded when they were rehearsing in the Mars Hotel. It was a big, steel cylinder, you've got to remember—very bare, hardly any furniture except for some tables and chairs and a couple of data screens suspended from the ceiling. As far as acoustics go, it sounded like they were playing in a tin can. The sound would reverberate off the walls and make them sound louder than they really were, and you could hear them all over the base. At first a few people minded, but once they got good—believe me, they were just awful at first—people stopped complaining and started coming by to listen. After a while, I stopped being strict with them about keeping their hours on the clock. Their music was like a little piece of Earth. God knows they were good for morale.

Salvador "Sal" Minella; chief dietician, Arsia Station

I think their best moment was on Christmas night in '21, when they played for the beer bust we held in the Mars Hotel. Everyone knows what they sounded like that night, because that was the performance that Billy DeWolfe taped and brought back to Earth.

You know that DeWolfe was the one who smuggled Gary's and Tiny's guitars out there, right? Well, DeWolfe was a pipeline for all sorts of things. You sent him a message asking for something and arranged a cash transfer from your bank account back home to his, and unless NASA or Skycorp caught him he would make sure that it was loaded into the cargo lander of either the *Enterprise* or the *Shinseiki* when it left Earth the next time. You might have to wait nine months or more, but if Billy could get it for you, he'd do so, with only a slight markup.

We had long since arranged for eight cases of Budweiser to make it aboard the *Enterprise* in '21, because the timing was that the ship would arrive just in time for Christmas. Al Gass had already arranged with Skycorp for some freeze-dried turkey to be sent out, but Billy and I figured that the crew would appreciate some suds more than the turkey. Christmas dinner and the party afterwards would be held in the ward room, and I managed to twist Tiny's arm into getting his band to play after dinner.

To make a long story short . . . well, you've heard it already. It was a damn good show. We drank beer, we danced, we had a good time. We forgot about Mars for a while. You can hear a little bit of that in the background on the tape, but a lot of the stuff was edited out, like Joe playing a weird version of "White Christmas" and that sort of thing.

About halfway through the evening, I spotted Billy DeWolfe standing near the stage, which we had made out of a collapsed cargo pallet, with

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a cassette recorder in his hand. I don't think the band noticed what he was doing—and if they did, they wouldn't have cared—but I wandered over to him and said, "Hey, you trying to steal the show or something?"

Billy just grinned and said, "I'm only getting something to show the folks back home what they're missing." I remember getting a kick out of that. Never stopped to consider if the son of a bitch was serious.

Billy DeWolfe; former Skycorp/NASA deep-space pilot

It wasn't my idea at first to record the Mars Hotel so I could take the tape to a record company. It's just that the trip back to Earth is as long as the trip out, and since the command crew doesn't get to ride in the zombie tanks like the passengers, you have to find things to entertain you during that long haul. I made the tape so I would have something to listen to while I was standing watch, that's all, so it pisses me off when people say that I was trying to rip off the band.

I didn't consider taking the tape to a record producer until much later. I had been listening to it over and over, and at some point it occurred to me that it was too bad that people on Earth couldn't hear the Mars Hotel. Then, the more I listened to it, I realized that it was a really good tape. There was hardly any background noise, and what there was sounded just like the audience sounds you hear from any recorded live performance. I thought it was as good as any ceedee or tape I had ever heard. By the time the *Enterprise* rendezvoused in LEO with Columbus Station, I had decided to contact a cousin who lived in Nashville to see if he could provide me with any leads to the record companies there.

Why didn't I ask permission from the band? (Shrugs.) I was embarrassed. I knew none of those guys were into this for the money, or even to be heard beyond Arsia Base. They wouldn't have given themselves the chance to make it big. But I wanted to do them a favor by trying to give them that chance. Hey, if doing somebody a favor is criminal, I plead guilty.

Gary Smith

Did we mind what Billy did? Of course we minded! (Laughs.) We bitched about it all the way to the bank!

Excerpt from "Martians Invade Earth!" by Barry O'Conner; from Rolling Stone, *June 21, 2023*

DeWolfe was turned down by every major record company on Nashville's "Music Row" before he approached Centennial Park Records with his tape of the Mars Hotel. Indeed, company president and producer Saundra Lewis nearly ejected the space pilot from her office as well when she heard that DeWolfe had not been authorized by the group to represent

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them. She also did not believe that the tape had been recorded on Mars. "My first thought was that it had been recorded in a basement in Birmingham, not in the ward room of the Mars base," Lewis recalls.

However, she was impressed by the tape, and after extensive double-checking with Skycorp, she established that Tiny Prozini, Gary Smith, and Joe Mama were, in fact, active personnel at Arsia Base. Even though the Mars Hotel had no previous track record, Lewis decided to take a gamble. Centennial Park Records, while it had gained some respect among connoisseurs of acoustical bluegrass, blues, and rockabilly, was close to bankruptcy. "Since a virtually finished product was already in our hands, I felt like we had little to lose by cleaning it up and releasing it," she says. With DeWolfe acting as the group's agent, the company got permission from the Mars Hotel to release an edited version of the tape as an album, entitled *Red Planet Days*.

"We were surprised that a tape of one of our sessions had made its way to Nashville," says Tiny Prozini, "and for a little while we wanted to strangle Billy. But we figured, 'What the hell, maybe it will even sell a few copies,' so we gave in and signed a contract." Prozini leaned back in his chair and shrugged. "But we had zero expectations about it. I even said that we'd find copies in the cut-out bins by the time we got home."

Yet when *Red Planet Days* was released and the single was sent to rock and country stations in the U.S. and Canada, there occurred one of those unanticipated surprises which happen in the music industry once every few years. In hindsight, it can be explained why the album took off like a bullet; it was released at a time when the public was beginning to rediscover the acoustic, grass-roots sound. This was particularly the case on college campuses where students, sick of several generations of formula hard-rock, were once again listening to dusty LPs recorded in their grandparents' time by Jerry Jeff Walker, Howlin' Wolf, and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. A new band which had that old sound filled the gap. Yet there was also the fact that this was an album which had been recorded on Mars, by a group that was *still* on Mars.

"It added a certain mystique, no doubt about it," says Lewis, "and I'll admit that we marketed that aspect for all it was worth."

Within two weeks of its release, "Knockin' On Heaven's Door" was added to the heavy-rotation playlists of every major-market radio station in the country, and *Red Planet Days* was flying off the shelves in the record stores. By the end of the month, Centennial Park Records went back to press for a second printing on the disc, the first time the company had ever done so with one of its releases.

"It's the damnedest thing I ever saw," says WNHT Program Director Ben Weiss, who is credited with being the first New York City radio

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manager to add the Mars Hotel to his station's playlist. "No one even knew what these guys looked like. Not one concert appearance."

Which was precisely the problem for Centennial Park Records. The company, which only months before had been on the verge of filing under Chapter Eleven, now had a runaway hit. Unfortunately, neither a follow-up album nor a concert tour was possible, for the band was thirty-five million miles away. It was a record producer's nightmare.

"Naturally, we had to bring the mountain to Mohammed," says Lewis . . .

Gary Smith

I can't say that we were overwhelmed by the news that the disc had become a hit. In fact, we were sort of *under*whelmed. For one thing, it seemed like a distant event, and not just because of the miles involved. None of us even had a copy of the ceedee, because it hadn't been pressed by the time the last supply ship had left Earth. During a transmission from Skycorp SOC someone had held a copy up to the camera for us to see, but that was about it. We had never heard it played on the radio, of course. In fact, we barely remembered what we had played that night. So it was no big deal. It was almost as if *we* hadn't made the tape.

We were going back to being space jocks by then. The novelty of playing together was beginning to wear thin, and there was a lot of work that had to be done at the base before summer, which is sandstorm season there. But I also think we were unconsciously defending ourselves against this celebrity status which had been thrust upon us. Not that it wasn't fun to play music, but somehow people had started pointing fingers at us, saying, "Ooooh, *superstars!*" We hated that shit, and we wanted to get away from it.

But, y'know . . . (Shrugs). That wasn't the way it worked out. About a month before the next supply ship, the *Shinseiki,* arrived in Mars orbit, we received a priority message from Skycorp, signed by the CEO himself. It told us that our contracts had been terminated and that we were to return to Earth aboard the ship. We later found out that Skycorp had struck a deal with Saundra Lewis and a Los Angeles concert promoter. Skycorp was scratching our contracts so we could come to L.A. to cut another album and then do a concert tour.

Alan Gass

I'm not sure that they wanted to stay, but I don't think they wanted to go either. Mars gets under your skin like that. It seems like a terrible place while you're there, when you're working in spacesuits that smell like week-old socks and living in tin cans, but secretly you come to love

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Mars. I've been back for several years now, and there isn't a day when I don't think about the planet and wish I was back there.

I think Tiny especially realized that he was leaving something special behind. But no one gave them a choice. Skycorp, which had taken a beating from the press because of the cost overruns and fatalities incurred by the powersat project, had seen a chance at good publicity in the Mars Hotel. There's a clause in the fine print of everyone's contract that says the company reserves the right to terminate an employee's duty whenever it pleases, and Skycorp called in that clause when it made the deal with the record company. Joe, Tiny, and Gary weren't fired so much as they were, to use the old Army phrase, honorably discharged, but the deal still stank anyway.

The night before they left on the *Shinseiki,* they played one last gig in the Mars Hotel. Everyone showed up, and everyone tried to put a good face on it, but it was different than before. It was definitely a goodbye show, and no one wanted to see them go. But more than that, there was this sense that the Mars Hotel, the band, didn't belong to Mars anymore. It was another resource which had been dug out of the rocky red soil and flung out into space for someone else to use.

The band was also very somber. They played as well as they always did, but they didn't seem to have their hearts in it and they didn't play for very long. After they did "Sea Cruise" they just put down their instruments and smiled uncomfortably at everyone—the place was very quiet then—and mumbled something about needing some sleep before the launch next morning, and then they sorta shuffled out of the ward room. Just like that, it was over.

Saundra Lewis; producer, Red Planet Days *and* Kings of the High Frontier.

I don't know why it didn't work out . . .

(Long pause.) No, no. Scratch that. I know, or at least I think I know, why the Mars Hotel bombed after we got them back here. It's just hard for me to admit it, since I was part of it.

In the music business we tend to put talents into convenient little niches, thinking that if we can put a label on that which we can barely comprehend, we somehow control the magic. So the little niche that was carved for the Mars Hotel was "oldies band from Mars." Once we had made that label, we went about forcing them into the niche.

Once we got them back to Earth and into a studio in L.A., we got carried away with the realization that, unlike with *Red Planet Days,* here was a chance to tinker with the band's style. The euphemism is "fine-tuning," but in this case it was meddling. The unexpected success

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of the first album had made us overconfident; at least I, as the producer, should have reined myself in.

But we hired backup singers and session musicians by the busload, and added strings and horns and electric guitars and drums and choruses, thinking that we were improving the quality while, in fact, we were getting away from that elegant, stripped-down sound that was on *Red Planet Days*. Joe's mini-synth was replaced by a monstrous, wrap-around console he could barely operate, for example. Nor did we listen to their ideas. Tiny wanted to do "John Wesley Harding," for instance, but we decided that we wanted to have a more country-oriented approach, so we forced them into doing Willie Nelson's "Whisky River" instead, saying that it was bad luck to do two Dylan songs in a row. (Laughs.)

The only bad luck was that there were too many cooks in the kitchen. *Kings of the High Frontier* was an overproduced catastrophe. In hindsight, I can see where the errors of judgment were made, where we had diluted the very qualities that made the band strong. But worse than that, we failed to recognize a major reason why people liked the Mars Hotel. But we were too busy fooling with the magic, and it wasn't until they went out on the road that the lesson was learned.

Gary Smith

The promoter had booked us into medium-sized concert halls all over the country. The tour started in California and worked west through the Southwest into the South and up the east coast. It should have been just the three of us, and maybe doing small clubs instead, but the record company and the promoter, who were pulling all the strings, decided to send along the whole mob that had been in the studio doing the album.

We had no creative control. There was virtually nothing that we could veto. Each night, we were trying to do soulful, sincere versions of "Knockin' On Heaven's Door" on these huge amphitheatre stages with three backup singers, a couple of guitarists, a drummer, two horn players, and a piano, so there was this wall of sound that just hammered people back in their seats. And in the middle of this orchestra there were me and Tiny and Joe, wearing these silk silver jumpsuits that were some costume designer's idea of what we wore on Mars, while overhead spun a giant holographic image of Mars.

So it was all slick Hollywood-Nashville bullshit, the exact opposite of everything we wanted our music to be, manufactured by twits and nerds with a cynical outlook on what people wanted. (Shakes his head.) Well, you can't sell people what they don't want. Even though the concerts were almost all sell-outs, from up on the stage we could see people wincing, frowning, leaving their seats and not coming back. I stopped reading

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the reviews after a while, they were so grim. And *Kings of the High Frontier* was D.O.A. in the record stores, of course.

It ended in Baton Rouge at the tail-end of the tour. It had been another hideous show, and afterwards, while all the session players were drinking and screwing around in the hotel, the three of us slipped out and caught a cab to an all-night diner somewhere on the edge of town. At first all we wanted was to get an early-morning breakfast and to escape from the Nashville bozos for a little while, but we ended up staying there until dawn, talking about everything that had happened over the past few months, talking about what had happened to *us*.

We knew that we were sick of it all—the stardom, making crap records, touring—so there was practically no argument over whether we should break up the band. We didn't even try to think of ways to salvage something from the wreckage; all we wanted to do was to give the Mars Hotel a mercy killing before it became more embarrassing.

No, what we discussed was *why* things had turned so sour so quickly, and somehow in the wee hours of the morning, drinking coffee in the Louisiana countryside near the interstate, we came to the conclusion that we had been doomed from the moment we had left Mars.

It wasn't just the way *Kings of the High Frontier* had been made, or that we were doing George Jones instead of David Bromberg or Willie Nelson instead of Bob Dylan because someone decided that we should have the Nashville sound, whatever that is. No, it was the fact that we had been playing music that had been born on Earth, but we were doing it *on Earth*. What had made the Mars Hotel different many months before had been the fact that we were playing Earth music . . . *on Mars*.

It was a strange notion, but it made more sense the longer we considered it. We had taken a bit of human culture to Mars, and then exported it back. It was the same culture, we hadn't changed the songs, but what was different was that it had been performed by people living on another world. Back here, we were just another band doing a cover of "Sea Cruise." People take culture with them wherever they go, but what makes a frontier a home is when they start generating a culture of their own. We had been proving, without really realizing what we were doing, that it was possible to do something else on Mars than make rocket fuel and take pictures of dead volcanos.

It was then that Tiny surprised Joe and me. He pulled out of his jacket pocket a small notebook and opened it. I had seen him, now and then during the tour, sitting by himself and writing in it, but I had never really paid attention. Now he showed us what he had been doing—writing songs.

They weren't bad. In fact, they were pretty good. There was one called "Olympus Mons Blues," and another piece that hadn't yet been titled,

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about running from a sandstorm. Not sappy or stilted, but gritty, raw stuff. Great Mars Hotel material.

"But this isn't for us," he said when I commented that we should try playing them before we ended the tour. "At least this isn't anything that can be played here. I've got to go back *there* for this stuff to make sense, or if I'm going to write anything else about it."

It was ironic. While we had been on Mars, Tiny hadn't been able to write anything about the place. It took coming back to Earth for the words to finally come out. But his memories were beginning to dry up, the images were beginning to fade. Tiny knew that he had to go back if he was going to produce any more Mars songs. Nor would anyone appreciate them if they were sung from any place else but Mars.

He had the notion to apply for another duty-tour with Uchu-Hiko, since Skycorp obviously would be displeased if he tried to get his old job back from them. Joe was also up for it, but I wasn't. I liked breathing fresh air again, seeing plants that weren't growing out of a hydroponics tank. They didn't hold that against me, so we decided that, once we had fulfilled our contract obligations by finishing this tour, we would formally dissolve the band.

Afterwards, I moved back up to New Hampshire and started a small restaurant in North Conway with the money I had made. On weekends I played bass with a small bluegrass jug-band, but otherwise I lay low. I got postcards for a while from Tiny and Joe, telling me that they were now working for the Japanese and were being trained at the Cape for another job at Arsia Station.

A month before they left for Mars on the *Enterprise*—by coincidence, the pilot was to be Billy DeWolfe, who had gotten us into this mess in the first place—I got a final card from Tiny: *"We still need a bass player. Please reconsider. C'mon down and we'll make room for you."*

I didn't write back, figuring that he was just being cute. The shuttle went up to Columbus Station and the *Enterprise* launched from the Cape a few days later, and Joe and Tiny were on their way back . . .

(Long pause.) Funny. I almost said, "On their way back home." I guess it was. I guess it always will be now.

Billy DeWolfe

When Tiny and Joe climbed through the hatch into the manned lander, I never thought for an instant that I would be the last person to see them alive. I would have been piloting the lander down myself, if it weren't that I had to close down the *Enterprise* and bring the cargo lander down. I suppose I should consider myself lucky.

There weren't any great last words from either of them that I can recall, only Joe grinning and saying, "See you later," just before I shut

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and dogged the airlock hatch. I remember both of them being happy as hell to be back, though. During the two days since they had come out of the zombie tanks, while we were on our final approach and Mars was getting bigger and bigger, they had been talking about music, working on a song together—and they had been talking about *making* music, not just playing the oldies. (Laughs.) They said that when they were ready, they would give me a new tape to take back to Earth with me, as long as I didn't take it to Nashville.

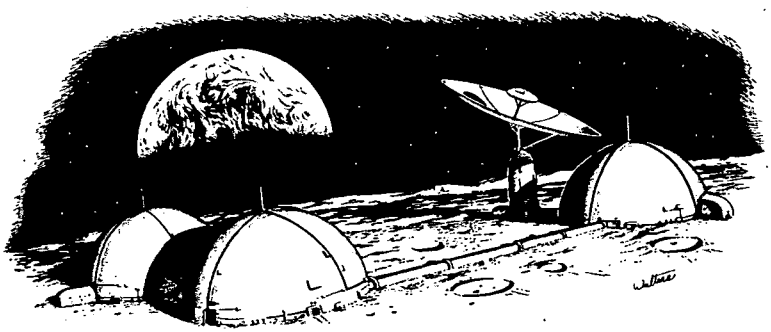
And y'know . . . suddenly, they were gone. I was on the command deck safeing everything for the return flight when Arsia Control came over the comlink, saying that they had lost telemetry with the lander.

Alan Gass

We buried them where we found them at the crash site, northeast of the Tharsis Montes range just above the equator. We wrapped Joe and Tiny, along with the three other people who had been in the lander, in the parachutes that had tangled after aerobraking, and buried their bodies under piles of rocks. I went back a few weeks later to place markers we had made from pieces of the wreckage. The floor of the desert shifts around a lot, so I don't know if the graves are even visible anymore.

Billy found their instruments in the cargo lander, and they're now in the Mars Hotel, hanging on the walls. Some country music museum wanted us to ship them back, so they could put Tiny's guitar and Joe's mini-synth on display, but we refused. It's more appropriate that they stay on Mars . . .

It's funny that you ask. A few days ago I got a letter from a friend who's still stationed there, telling me that somebody's been playing Tiny's guitar. Guy from Florida, who wanted to try it out and thought it was okay to take it down from the hooks. I don't think anyone minded very much. Besides, my friend says he's pretty good . . . ●



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HERE COMES BUNKY

by Ron Goulart

The author's most recent science fiction novel, *Everybody Comes to Cosmos*, was published early in 1988 by St. Martin's Press. His book, *The Dime Detectives*—a hardcover history of the mystery genre—has just been published and another, *The Great Comic Book Artists II*, is forthcoming.

art: Hank Jankus

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They debated about running that segment of the show at all. It was undoubtedly newsworthy, but also fairly horrifying.

Finally the producers of *Showtalk* decided to air the interview exactly as taped, preceded by a warning that what you were about to see involved the falling apart of someone who'd been an idol of television viewers some twenty years ago. The ratings on that particular show were impressively high in every one of its syndicated markets. The minute-and-a-half excerpt that showed his head falling into the co-host's lap, plus considerable speculation as to what exactly he'd been suffering from, appeared on all three of the nightly network news broadcasts. The publicity generated was incredible.

Publicity was one of the things Rick McNally had been after. That, and money, were the main topics he was preoccupied with when he stepped out into the path of an oncoming car in Santa Monica. That was about two weeks before the *Showtalk* broadcast, the day the final phase more or less began.

A fairly successful television writer named Pete Henkler was driving the dusty Mercedes. He hit the brakes, the car wobbled and sluiced before jittering to a halt less than three feet short of smacking into the middlesized actor.

Henkler didn't actually realize it was McNally until he shut the battered wallet he'd been squinting into when he stepped off the curb into traffic. He was quite a bit fatter than he'd been the last time the writer had seen him and he had much less hair.

He still had that grin, though, that mix of innocence and guile that had won the hearts of untold millions of viewers back in the middle sixties.

Henkler didn't know it at the moment but he was going to help finance McNally's comeback.

Coming around to the side of the car and ignoring the honking horns of the lined up vehicles, he said, "Just the fella I want to see."

"Hop in, Rick, and I'll—"

"Nope, I just rented a car over there at Junkheap Lowcost Rentals," he explained, showing Henkler the nearly empty innards of his wallet. "Did you ever watch somebody chop up your last credit card before your eyes? They just performed that act in there and thus I had to fork over cash in order—"

"So what do you want me to—"

"Buy me lunch. Across the street there in the Pup Tent. I find I only have a dollar and—"

"Hey, you lowgrade ingrown halfwit! This isn't old home week." An angry, deeply tanned man in a crimson convertible had swung around the stopped car and was yelling at McNally.

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Slipping his near empty wallet into the hip pocket of his designer jeans, McNally put both thumbs to his ears, waggled his fingers and made a raspberry noise at the passing motorist. "Nertz to you."

The brakes yelped. The car bucked. The sunbrown man, wearing spotless tennis togs, leaped free of his quivering vehicle and came charging over. "What did you just do, you misbetoten numbskull?"

"Nertz to you!" McNally repeated the business with the waggling fingers at the side of his head.

The angry motorist formed his right hand into a fist. "Nobody makes . . . Holy Moses!" He dropped his hand, fingers uncoiling, and took a step back. "You . . . you're Bunky's older brother."

McNally gave him the grin. "That's me."

"Boy, I used to watch that show every week when I was in college. We all did, every damn member of the Phi Sig house down at—"

"Why don't you faggots take your rendezvous elsewhere?" A bearded youth piloting a battered ice cream truck was trying to weave his way around the cars and the two men.

The suntanned man pointed at McNally. "This is Bunky's older brother."

"I don't care if he's John the Baptist's twin sister, I got to haul . . . you mean from *Here Comes Bunky?* Good gravy, I watch that show each and every night in reruns. I taped about two dozen of my favorites but then the dumb lady I was living with moved back to Des Moines and took the VCR plus—"

"Rick," Henkler said, "I'll park over by the restaurant and meet you inside."

"Appreciate that," he said. "I'm about to embark on a great journey and I can use a hearty meal."

The hefty waitress missed the table by a foot or more and dropped the Pup Tent menus on the floor next to the booth. "I know you," she said accusingly to McNally. "Don't tell me. You're . . . um . . ."

"See?" he said across the booth to the writer. "After a certain point in this business, people start playing trivia games with your life."

"Bunky!" she exclaimed with a broad smile. "You're Bunky's big brother Clipper. Gosh, my husband and I watch repeats of *Here Comes Bunky* twice a night. We even make love during them sometimes so as not to miss a—"

"That's truly flattering," he said, grinning up at her. "I'm in a sort of rush, though, and I'd like to order."

She continued to stare at him, twisting one plump finger around in her frazzled hair. "You're chunkier now and you don't have as much of

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that cute wavy hair," she told him. "But when you smile . . . you're Clipper."

"I am. And I'd like a Hawaiian Dog with a sideorder of—"

"Remember what you and Bunky used to do when you greeted each other? You'd both stick your fingers in your ears and—"

"Nertz to you." He did the ear and finger routine for her.

"That's it. That's exactly how you did it."

"Hawaiian Dog," he repeated.

"Oh, yes, to be sure." She scribbled on her order pad. "And your friend?"

"Just coffee," said Henkler.

She took another admiring look at McNally. "Can I ask you one more question?"

"Sure."

"Whatever happened to the actor who played Bunky?"

"He's still around. Fact is, I'll be seeing him tonight."

"Give him my best." Turning, she left the area.

Henkler inquired, "You know where Scotty Hucks is?"

"In all the wide world, I'm the only one who does."

"I hear Homespuun Megatainment is looking for him, has been for weeks. They want to do a cable show with—"

"Don't I know that? Haven't I been busting my toke for nearly a month working out a way to get him back here to Hollywood? Didn't that pea-brained Buckaroojian who heads up the cable outfit offer me $10,000 per week to play Clipper in his proposed new show *It's Bunky Again*? Hasn't my flinthearted agent, Mo Percher of Talent Unlimited, been almost cordial to me of late and incredibly supportive as he's urged me to help him find Scotty and get him here?"

"Won't they do the new show without him?"

"Buckaroojian's even dippier about *Here Comes Bunky* than our blimpy waitress or those goons outside." He ran his hand across his head as though he still possessed wavy hair. "He's rounded up the rest of the regulars, two out of three of the old writers and our best director. He's talking about a guaranteed twenty two segs. Right, I'll make almost a quarter million on this. Which I can truly use, since I haven't made nickel one on residuals since back in—"

"And you know where to find Scotty Hucks?"

"Yes, I surely do," he said. "And you're just about the only guy in this heartless town I trust enough to tell about this."

"Been all sorts of rumors about him," Henkler said. "That he's living in South America with a fruit export heiress, that he entered a religious retreat in the Midwest, that—"

"None of that is true."

"Where's he been then?"

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"He's been dead," replied McNally.

Standing at the curb beside his rented 1979 grey Chevette, the hazy afternoon sun making his nearly bald head perspire, McNally attempted to explain what he was up to. "You've got to have faith," he told Henkler.

"Going to take a hell of a lot of faith to raise the dead."

"This guy can do it, trust me. He's a first rate sorcerer."

"How'd you find—"

"Remember that show, *Odd, Isn't It?*, that was a big hit a few seasons back? That had, you know, strongmen, mystics, pinheads and—"

"He was on that?"

"Well, he tried out but he didn't make the grade. That was only because Cardwell couldn't show off his full powers for fear of—"

"Is that Tony Cardwell, an old drunk who lives around Oxnard and claims—"

"The old gentlemen does have a slight booze problem, yes. But he's an authentic sorcerer, a specialist in the kind of resurrection I need for—"

"How many people has he brought back from the dead so far?"

"People, none, but . . . Well, he revived a chimpanzee that was over in glory for five months."

The writer said, "How come you're the only one who knows what happened to Scotty Hucks?"

Glancing up and down the block, McNally answered, "I had nothing whatsoever to do with his being killed like that."

"Like what?"

"Well, it was nearly two years ago. I hadn't heard from him for maybe three, four years, nobody had," began the actor. "Turns out Scotty'd been working as a trucker down in Texas and Oklahoma. He'd grown a lot since *Bunky*, was near to six feet tall and weighed about two hundred."

"So nobody recognized him."

"Exactly. As I mentioned, we stopped getting rerun money from the show years ago. There wasn't any reason for anyone from this crass metropolis to keep track of Scotty."

"But he got in touch with you?"

"I've been here all along, scuffling, doing bits on TV, voices for commercials," he said. "Scott had gotten himself involved in a scheme . . . well, it sounded like we could make us a stewpot of money. He invited me in on it."

"Drugs?"

McNally nodded. "It was a sort of smuggling operation, yep," he admitted. "Thing is, it went flooey. These guys down in Mexico, our contacts, got suspicious and started shooting. Scotty got hit . . . by the time I'd snaked us back across the border in our rattletrap of a truck, he was

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dead and gone." He sighed, stroking his imaginary hair. "I did a sort of heartless thing. Here was the guy who'd been my kid brother for seven very successful seasons. But he was dead from gunshot wounds and I couldn't figure out how the heck I could explain that to the cops, or anybody else. I was driving through this dinky California border town—Santa Toronja it's called and you've never heard of it—and I chanced to pass a rundown cemetery. The last person laid to rest there was buried in 1916. So I . . . I buried him there that night."

"Nobody ever found out?"

"Heck, nobody was interested in Scotty anymore," he replied. "Then Buckaroojian comes up with this terrific idea to bring back Bunky and make us all rich once again. I can really use that $10,000 a week. Except there's no deal unless they can sign Scotty."

"Rick, you better forget about it. They'll get tired of hunting for him in a while. Then HM'll come up with a new hot idea and maybe they'll have a part for—"

"Sure, I'm going to give up a chance at $220,000." He frowned. "Listen, I'm anxious to thrive again, to own a car, to have a valid credit card, to live someplace besides Rita's splashy mansion and . . . well, I want to be a person with some dignity."

"You're living with Rita again?"

"No, nope," he said. "What I'm doing, since it coincided with my being tossed out of my hovel in Venice because of a foolish misunderstanding about the plumbing, I'm sort of housesitting for my former wife."

"That's right. Rita McNally's in Asia someplace shooting—"

"*Andy Hardy Goes to Vietnam.* Going to be another big hit for her at MGM/UA. Combination of a teenage appeal flick and a bloody war movie." Taking a few shallow breaths, he slid into the car. "What I'm doing is residing in her Beverly Hills manse and performing a few simple duties."

"Is Rita still fond of cats?"

He stuck the key in the ignition, not looking at me. "Well, there's still one cat underfoot," he said. "Looking after it is one of my chores. But I don't do any housework, there's a woman comes twice a week. Well, adiós, I'm off for the borderland."

"Rick, you ought not to—"

"I'll buy you lunch when my show gets rolling." Grinning, he drove off into the smog.

McNally and Cardwell arrived in Santa Toronja well after midnight. The Junkheap car broke down twice en route, the sorcerer had insisted on stopping not only for dinner but for cocktails and a heavy rain had commenced shortly after sundown. The funding for those meals and

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drinks came from the sixty-five dollars Henkler had been persuaded to loan him.

"You done tore . . . you done tore your playhouse down," sang the plump old wizard as he went stumbling across the weedy rainswept graveyard with his lumpy duffel bag clutched to his chest. "Mama, you done tore your playhouse down. That's 'cause you started foolin' around. I say—"

"Hush," advised McNally. He was carrying the shovel.

"Eh?"

"Graverobbers shouldn't sing."

"Actually, my boy, we're not robbing a grave. After all, this lad was planted by you and thus you have a perfect right to—"

"Even so. Let's make as little noise as possible."

"Tell me, mama, where did you sleep last night," sang the sorcerer, narrowly missing a fallen headstone. "I want to know, mama, where did you—"

"Cardwell, quit that."

"You're very jumpy, lad."

"If the cops notice us, it'll be difficult to explain what—"

"Easiest thing in the world. They'll remember you two from *Here Comes Bunky*. They'll be touched by your desire to be re-united with your—"

"This is the spot. Right next to the tree." McNally, the night rain beating down on him, stopped and pointed.

The sorcerer dropped his duffel to the grassy ground. Sitting on it, he searched his pockets until he found his flask. "You'd best," he suggested, "dig the poor fellow up."

That task took McNally nearly an hour.

When he finally saw the body, illuminated by the glow of the tiny penlight he'd brought, he was disappointed. "He's in awful shape."

Leaning, Cardwell scanned the corpse of Scotty Hucks. "Lying in the ground for a year or two'll do that, yes." He took another sip of brandy. "This will, as I feared, require considerable—"

"Can you revive him? I stand to lose $10,000 a week if—"

"Try to be more positive. Most certainly I can revive him. But not here." He slapped the duffel bag his broad backside rested upon. "I don't have sufficient equipment for such a chore. And I'll need an additional $5,000."

"Where are I going to get—"

"You don't listen with sufficient attentiveness." Wheezing, the old sorcerer got to his feet. "I agreed to perform this miracle on a contingency basis. As soon as you get paid by *It's Bunky Again*, you hand over $15,000 to me."

"Sure, but how—"

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"Now you're simply going to fork over $20,000 on that glad day. To get this lad to look like anything is going to take more magic and arcane ingredients than I anticipated."

"$20,000 is an awful lot of—"

"Then start piling the sod back on Bunky."

After a few seconds McNally agreed, "Okay, you'll get $20,000. But that's two full weeks' pay."

Cardwell said, "I'll now return to your automobile. Bring the cadaver along."

"You're certain he can be brought back to life?"

"Easy as pie."

"And he won't look . . . look like he does now?"

"He'll be quite personable and presentable. That's what the extra five thou is for." He began making his tottering way back to their car in the heavy rain.

The cleaning woman was a sturdy greyhaired lady of forty-seven. She was sitting on the wide red tile porch of Rita McNally's Moorish mansion when McNally drove Cardwell and Scotty Hucks' body onto the walled grounds shortly before noon the next day.

"Darn, that's Mrs. Ferguson come to clean. I forgot this was her day." He parked the battered Chevette near the row of garages. "Stay here, Cardwell. Keep that blanket over him."

While he was still trotting up the white gravel path toward her, Mrs. Ferguson rose up. "The cat's howling and having fits in there."

He could hear the animal yowling away inside. "That's funny," he said, grinning his best Clipper grin. "I fed her only a couple hours ago."

"No, you didn't, Mr. McNally, because I've been camping on this chill porch since 8:30 A.M., which is when I am supposed to report for work," Mrs. Ferguson informed him. "That creature has been caterwauling in there ever since I arrived. Not only that, but the phone's been ringing to beat the—"

"Cats are supposed to do that. Caterwaul. She senses you out here and is showing her deep affection for—"

"I loathe that animal, and she knows it."

"Then why—"

"Mrs. McNally, god bless her, adores that beast. Therefore, I want to make sure no harm comes to it as long as I am employed by—"

"Noble," he said, patting her on the elbow. "We won't need you today, Mrs. F. Can you pop over tomorrow instead? See, my—"

"What time tomorrow?"

"Nine."

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"I'll be here with bells on," she said. "And I expect to be paid for the time I cooled my heels today."

"Rita'll take care of that."

"I assumed she would."

The corpse came back to life at about three minutes shy of midnight. McNally wasn't present at the time.

The phone had started ringing while Cardwell, decked out in a soiled silken robe and a feathered headdress, was dancing around the pool table. The old magician was chanting, making mystical signs in the air, carrying a stick of sputtering incense and scattering something he called goofer dust out of what looked to be a salt shaker swiped from an all night diner. Scotty Hucks was stretched out atop the table.

McNally didn't want to take any calls in the game room. But, suspecting it was Rita again, he was afraid not to answer.

Sprinting into the living room, he grabbed up the phone there. "McNally's Housesitting Service. We never sleep."

"Har har," said his onetime wife in her world reknowned sultry voice. "You're about as funny as a crotch."

"That's crutch," he corrected. "And how's the location work going, Rita? From what I've been reading in the old trades, *Andy Hardy Goes to Vietnam* is going to be the big one come next summer. It's going to have legs, going to—"

"Do you honestly think I'm spending all this flapping money on a phone call to chat with you, Ricky?"

"There was a time when—"

"Put Ethel on the damn phone."

"Ethel?"

"Ethel M. Dell, my cat."

"That Ethel, yes, of course. Hold on a sec while—"

"Don't you even know where she is at this hour of the—"

"She's right here," he lied. "I'll fetch her."

He set the receiver on the glass coffee table, having no idea where the damn cat had wandered to. When he was a safe distance from the phone, he started calling in a low voice. "Ethel, Ethel, Ethel. Kitty, kitty, kitty. Ethel M. Dell, get your ass in here."

A sudden shriek of pain came from within the game room. It sounded as though someone was killing a cat.

"Killing a cat?" He ran over, yanked open the door and was confronted by the sight of Cardwell plunging a carving knife into Ethel M. Dell on the pool table.

"Dumbala mojumbo!" chanted the tipsy wizard.

"What in the hell have you done, you soused old—"

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"A sacrifice was required, my boy," explained Cardwell as he pulled the blade free. "Goats are better, but since there wasn't one handy I had to—"

"You've murdered Ethel M. Dell."

"If that's the tabby's name, I surely have. Had I not made the blood sacrifice when I did, we might well have lost any chance of reanimating this lad. Now stand clear."

Feeling as though all the air was leaking out of him, McNally trudged back into the living room. Five feet from the phone he started talking. "Nice kitty, nice kitty. You're going to talk to your moms in far off Asia-wasia."

"What did I tell you about talking that dippy baby talk to Ethel?" Rita was asking when he picked up the instrument.

"Sorry, Rita," he apologized. "Here, I'm holding the phone right up to her fuzzy little ear."

"Ethel? This is Rita."

McNally made what he hoped was an appealing mewing noise. "Meow meow."

"What's that lout been feeding you? You sound awful, Ethel."

"Purr purr. Meow meow. Purr."

"You really sound like you're getting a cold. Put that idiot back on."

"Meow meow meow."

"Get Ricky, damn it!"

"Hi, Rita. Have a nice gabfest with—"

"She's sick, isn't she? Don't lie."

"No, she is absolutely not sick."

"You better hope she isn't. Because if she is, it's going to be your toke in a sling," warned Rita from Asia. "Furthermore, you better call—"

"Yike!"

"Was that Ethel?"

"No, nope. That was me. Bumped my knee." He was staring at the open doorway to the game room.

Scotty Hucks was standing there. He didn't look that bad, considering.

"You call Dr. Brown," Rita said. "Have him look Ethel over first thing in the—"

"I shall, Rita. Don't worry, just concentrate on giving your usual brilliance perf—"

Rita hung up.

Scotty lurched into the room. "Was this your dumb idea, putz?" he asked, shedding bits of grave soil on the orange carpeting.

Scotty paced, in a lopsided way, around the guest bedroom. "And that tacky cemetery you stuck me in," he was complaining. "Nobody ever

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came there to leave so much as a bunch of daisies. What I mean is, Valentino at least has that bimbo who leaves roses every—"

"The circumstances were unusual." McNally was seated, uneasy, at the vanity table.

"Not once did anybody so much as mow the grass," continued the reanimated actor. "And you couldn't even come up with a cheap tombstone to mark the—"

"I was afraid the police or those guys you set up the deal with would—"

"A little stone wouldn't have—"

"Listen, I didn't kill you, remember? It was that supposedly trustworthy drug dealer who was going to make us rich. I should've suspected earlier. A Mexican who didn't even know what a chile relleno was."

"He knew, but he thought you were mocking his ethnic—"

"Gents, why don't you get down to business." Cardwell came weaving into the room. "The sooner a deal is struck, the sooner I collect my fee."

"Who's this schmuck?" asked Scotty.

"Scotty, he's a great sorcerer and he brought you back from the dead," explained McNally. "Because of that, we're all of us going to get rich."

Cardwell worked more spells, after McNally had filled the reanimated actor in on how much they'd make off *It's Bunky Again*. By dawn Scotty was looking even less like a corpse. He still didn't seem in the best of health, but he could pass for alive.

While the old sorcerer was chanting and doing his magic, McNally buried Ethel M. Dell off near a high stucco wall at the rear of his former wife's estate. Just about all the bloodstains washed out of the pool table felt, though the green turned a little paler in that area.

Mrs. Ferguson, lugging a shopping bag full of her own cleaning products, arrived a few minutes short of nine. McNally told her to postpone her cleaning mission for another two days. He slipped her a ten dollar bill they'd found in Scotty's wallet. Sniffing at it, the cleaning woman asked after the cat. McNally assured her Ethel was in tip top shape.

That afternoon he phoned his agent with the news he'd located Scotty Hucks. Percher told him to bring Scotty over to the Talent Unlimited offices at eleven the next morning.

After McNally shaved the next morning, he went into the room Scotty was using. "Better get up, buddy. We have to see Mo at . . . oops." He tripped over something on the floor.

"Clumsy as ever, huh? What'd you fall over this time?"

"Looks like your hand. But . . . your hand?"

Squinting at his left pajama sleeve, the resurrected actor said, "Yeah, that's my left hand."

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"How're we going to see Mo Percher? I'm trying to convince him your fit as a—"

"I shake hands with my right. We can rig something."

"Suppose he wants us to do the old greeting business. Hands at ears, fingers—"

"I'll tell him I don't do that until we have a signed contract."

"Money," explained the magician over the phone.

"Fine, $25,000 when we—"

"What's needed, my boy, is five hundred bucks right now."

"For what?"

"Listen, Richard, I don't wish to dampen your spirits, but there is sometimes the possibility with these reactivated corpses that they'll fall apart. Something about being dead for a bit has that effect on certain systems," Cardwell said.

"How do we halt it, prevent it? Suppose he's talking to Buckaroojian and his nose falls off or—"

"Relax, my lad. There's a simple spell that, more often than not, takes care of this very problem."

"Come right on over here to—"

"What I lack is one of the essential ingredients. Only place on the West Coast I can get it in a hurry is up in Frisco, in Chinatown. That's what the five hundred is for."

"Probably take me a day to raise that. Stand by and I'll call you back."

Mo Percher was enthusiastic. He told Scotty he looked great now that he'd slimmed down. Percher would set up a meeting with Buckaroojian and Homespun Megatainment. And he'd start working on publicity. Day after tomorrow, matter of fact, the two hosts of *Showtalk* would be at Rita's mansion to tape eight minutes with Scotty, and possibly they'd have McNally come in toward the end so they could do the greeting so many millions loved.

"You know, the finger wiggle bit. Could you do it for me—"

"I'm saving it," explained Scotty, "for the media."

Getting the five hundred dollars Cardwell required turned out to be easy. Placing a collect call to Rita at the *Andy Hardy Goes to Vietnam* location, McNally told her that Ethel the cat had a psychosomatic respiratory ailment. The vet suggested a very exclusive cat therapist named Professor Anthony Cardwell. The professor could fit Ethel in tomorrow, but insisted on his money in front. $500 to be exact. Anxious over the cat, Rita agreed to get in touch with her bank and have them draw up a check for the professor to drop in and pick up.

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Cardwell did set out for the bank, that much McNally knew. That was, however, the last he heard from the old sorcerer. The day passed and waned, another dawned. No trace of Cardwell.

McNally tried to postpone the *Showtalk* interview but Mo Percher informed him that couldn't be done without making too many people angry.

About two hours before the interviewers and crew were due, he went up to Scotty's room. Knocking on the door, he said, "Hey, Bunky, up and at 'em."

"Plenty of time."

"We have to fix you up some." He pushed the door open. "I was thinking maybe we can stick the hand on with . . . oops."

"Can't you ever make a graceful entr—"

"That's great, marvelous. I seem to have stumbled over your left foot."

Flinging off the covers, the reanimated actor said, "Right foot actually."

"Whichever. I don't see how we can—"

"If I'm already sitting down when they troop in, we can rig up a fake foot for now. Stuff my shoe with rags or—"

"Sit still. Don't move." Crouching, McNally came slowly closer to the bed.

"Now what?"

Tapping the side of his own head, McNally replied, "Ear. Ear's missing."

Scotty touched the right side of his head. "So it is," he said. "That's going to be harder to hide. But once I find it, we can maybe—"

"Glue. We can stick it back on with Wacky Glue."

"If that wino wizard of yours hadn't skipped with the money instead of getting the magic stuff we need, I—"

"Soon as this interview is wrapped, I'm going to go out and track down Cardwell. Then we'll have him fix you up so—"

The bedside phone had started ringing.

McNally grabbed it up. "If that's you, Cardwell, I'd like to know—"

"Button your yap, Ricky, and listen to me," ordered Rita. "I want you out of that house by dusk."

"Dusk? That's an unusual—"

"If you're not out I may just bring murder charges against you and—"

"Murder? I haven't—"

"Wasn't bad enough you lied to me about poor Ethel's needing a specialist," said his former wife. "I'm glad I was suspicious enough to phone Dr. Brown."

"Found it," said Scotty, holding up his ear.

"What about the check for—"

"I instructed my bank to give that phony professor the old heaveho

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and call the cops when he stumbled in. Or was that you posing as Cardwell?"

"There is a Cardwell. A highly respected—"

"Thank goodness dear, loyal Mrs. Ferguson called to tell me she'd been digging in the garden and found poor Ethel's mangled body."

"She's not supposed to do gardening. I have a Japanese man who—"

"Good thing she got suspicious of you," cut in Rita. "Now start packing."

The interview didn't go badly during the early moments. The two boyish actors sat side by side on a sofa, Scotty with his legs carefully crossed and his left hand seemingly in the pocket of his blazer. McNally came across as enthusiastic about the new show and supportive of his longtime colleague.

The hosts were Don Belch and the beautiful Chicky Ritzkin.

She was obviously fascinated with Scotty. Running her slender fingers through her tawny golden hair, she leaned toward him and smiled a lot. "You were such a very, very important part of my growing up, Scotty."

"And most everybody's," put in Belch.

"I used to fantasize about you," she continued, staring into his face. "That you were my boyfriend, that I was your steady girl. That you'd take me to a sock hop with money borrowed from your nasty older brother."

"I wasn't nasty," protested McNally, grinning.

"You know, Scotty, I must've had close to a hundred pictures of you up in my little bedroom," said Chicky, reaching out to pat his knee. "My mother thought I was goofy."

"Actually," said Belch, "many, many teenage girls were wild about both these young men back then. And many still are, I might add."

"At night," continued the lovely blonde, "I'd go around and kiss every single picture goodnight. And some of them were pasted on the ceiling."

"Obviously," said Scotty, smiling, "you're the ideal person to conduct this interview about our comeback, Chicky."

She sighed, putting her hands together in a sort of supplicating way. "Would you, could you, do the greeting?"

"I'm having a little problem with tennis elbow in my left arm, which—"

"Just use your right," she urged. "It's long been my dream to have Bunky greeting me that way."

Glancing at McNally, he said, "We'll both do it."

McNally thrust his thumbs into his ears, waggled his fingers and made the familiar rude noise.

Scotty did the same, using only his right hand.

On the third waggle there was an odd crumbling sound. Then his right hand broke free of his arm and fell to the carpet.

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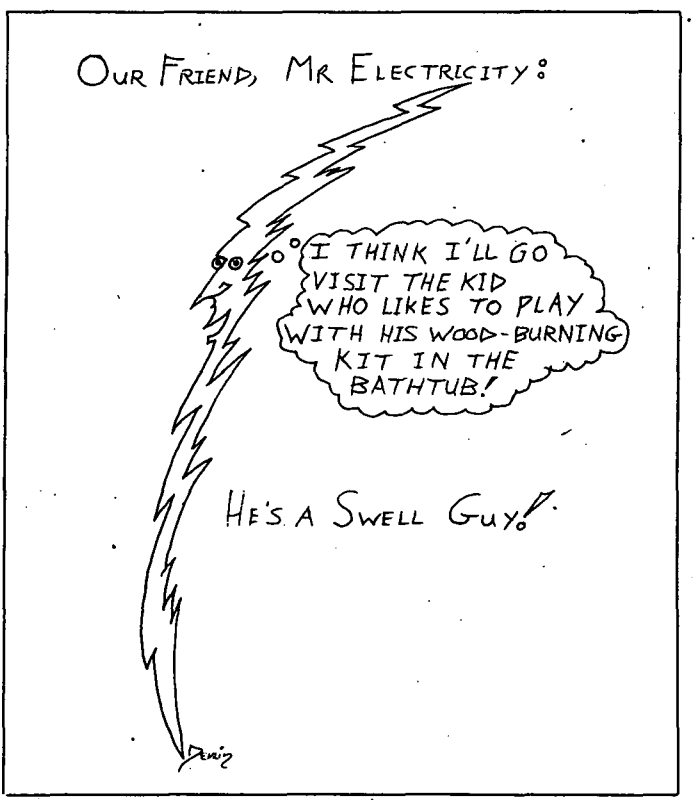
Chicky slumped back in her armchair, shrieking.

"What's wrong, old man?" Belch started slapping Scotty on the back.

There was a louder crack. The resurrected actor's head broke free of his body, rolled down the front of his blazer, bounced once on the blonde interviewer's lap before hitting the floor with a soft thunk.

"There goes my $10,000 a week," muttered McNally.

The incident got so much publicity, in this country and everywhere else in the world eventually, that Homespun Megatainment is seriously considering producing *It's Bunky Again* anyway. They'll simply hire a new actor to portray the part of Bunky grownup. And since they're going to cast a new Bunky, they'll probably get a new Clipper, too. Somebody, they're thinking, a few years younger than McNally. ●


OUR FRIEND, MR ELECTRICITY:
I THINK I'LL GO VISIT THE KID WHO LIKES TO PLAY WITH HIS WOOD-BURNING KIT IN THE BATHTUB!
HE'S A SWELL GUY.

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JOAN'S WORLD

by Ian Watson

art: Nicholas Jainschigg

An ordinary individual *can* ofttimes accomplish the unusual

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On my fourteenth birthday my parents gave me the planet Earth as a present. They couldn't afford a regular gift.

Who could, in our neighborhood? Paying for essentials was hard enough. How sad to see some mothers and fathers scraping together a little spare cash only to waste it on trash which wouldn't last, from the camp market. I sympathized, and had told Mum and Dad well in advance that I wanted nothing but their love.

They told me that, on the contrary, they would give me everything; and they kept their word.

It happened this way. We lived in a mobile home on the edge of a camp of a thousand such, stuck in the middle of the countryside. None of the homes, in truth, would be moving anywhere. All had seen better days twenty, thirty years earlier. The air had leaked out of tires, the rubber had rotted down to the bare axles. A twice-weekly bus service linked us with a town ten miles away, where you could only wander around feeling sad; hardly anybody used the bus. The landscape around the camp was a patchwork of pasture, woodland, and river meadow where you could snare a few rabbits and catch a few fish to supplement your rations. During seven months of the year I'm sure the vicinity of the camp, if not the camp itself, was pleasanter than some moribund town. Throughout the winter a fence may as well have enclosed us. Inside, we had all our basic needs: school, clinic, library, church hall, welfare office open every Monday—five corrugated iron buildings of assorted sizes. A small canvas-covered market was held every other day in the open air. School, clinic, welfare, and market were run by outsiders who drove in from town, foreigners commuting from another country, though they too had their sorrows. We in the camp were simply a special case of a more general condition. Power was laid on to all homes with reasonable reliability. In a fair proportion of the caravans old TV sets were switched on from breakfast through to bedtime.

Once, so I heard, there'd been fights and drunkenness as signs of frustration. No longer; frustration itself had worn out. One section of our camp—"the monastery," we called it—had turned religious. Make a virtue of your poverty and limited horizons; hitch your wagon to a prayer. Some young people were cultivating different inner resources by meditating, staring at the sky, chanting to themselves, trying to open the third eye. Others read romances or day-dreamed or played endless games. Babies were born, but not many. I'd been born in the camp myself and basically had known nowhere else, though thanks to TV you might say I had also known everywhere. Yet this was an out-of-date everywhere, an everywhere from the past before life turned grey, before new things quit happening, or seemed to quit. The aliens in orbit saw to that, we were sure.

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Those unseen aliens who had dimmed the life of the world, who had turned down the lights of existence for us! Every few weeks we could spy their artificial world crossing the night sky, a brighter Venus, as it wove its complex orbit around us, taking it over every portion of the Earth at some time or other.

"It's a spider wrapping up a fly in silk till the fly can't move a muscle," I'd said to my teacher from town, Miss Perry. She was skinny, with freckles and hair like rusty wires. I thought of her as rusting away along with the schoolhouse walls, yet still with some spring inside her, some bounce. She did her best to make us think.

"Maybe there aren't any aliens *living* up there, Joan," she said to me. "Maybe it's just a huge machine, all automatic."

"When we're thoroughly paralyzed, they'll arrive from the stars?"

"What do the rest of you think?" she asked the class at large. Most faces remained blank. We kids never played truant, though. Coming to school was something to do. Leaving school at sixteen was a threat—of emptiness and inactivity.

"Miss, I still don't understand what they're doing to us," fat Peter Dimble said stubbornly. What they were doing to Peter was making him fat and sluggish. That was the result. "Are they shooting some sort of ray at us from space? Why didn't we ever shoot back? We could have. I've seen rockets and missiles on TV."

"In our universe we didn't shoot back. On our world-line we didn't."

"You mean we *did* shoot back in the other universe? I wish I lived there. How do I get there?"

Miss Perry sighed. "You can't. Maybe the other universes are all just ghosts, possibilities that vanish."

She had been explaining how each single event which could occur gave rise to two whole universes. In one universe the event happened. In another it failed to happen. The aliens forced our world to be the one where the event didn't happen. This was what the scientists believed.

Over and over in innumerable ways, large ways at first then lesser ones, the aliens made our world-line switch from non-event to non-event. Initiatives ran out of steam. Decisions had no consequences. Choices led to inaction. Plans were canceled, unless they were of little importance in the first place. It had to be that star in the sky which was responsible, that new little moon. How else to account for our paralysis? Wars had long since ceased. Violence had tailed off. Try as we might, always the least dramatic choice was made, the choice to do less, or nothing. Things stopped being built, designed, discovered. The economy ticked by in low gear. I suppose it had to tick, otherwise something dramatic *would* have occurred: such as chaos and starvation. We had seen an end to disasters as well, to any terrible accidents, tragedies, calamities of the human or

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the natural variety. All such wild events—good or bad, proud or bloody—only existed on TV, in old films, old newsreels from back when there was news.

"It's as if we're walking through an endlessly long building," Miss Perry told us. "We pass through a succession of rooms, where each room has two exits. Behind one door there might be anything at all—from a treasure chest to an exploding bomb. Behind the other door there's nothing except two more doors. Always, always we choose the door behind which there's nothing. Always, that empty room's waiting for us, not the one with something in it. The aliens empty the room the moment we grip the door knob. They switch the doors around. Or the rooms. The moment we decided to shoot our missiles at them, we were in a universe where we didn't."

"Can't we decide *not* to do something, so that it'll happen after all?" asked Jimmy Taylor, one of the black kids.

"It doesn't work that way, Jimmy."

No, it wouldn't. If we decided to do nothing that was fine by them in the sky. It was a very acceptable world-line. Had the aliens aimed to be kind to us by stopping war and strife and calamity, the heart-blood of those old films? I doubted it. They wanted to make us grey and slow, so that we would quit. That's all. It would take a long time for everything to run down calmly. We'd already had twenty years of it, starting before I'd been born. We might have another fifty or a hundred to go. The whole of my life, then some more. A life of less, and less.

"I'm born with three-score pennies in a purse. Each year a penny gets lost, next year another penny till finally I'm poor, utterly poor. By the time I'm old we shan't even understand those old films. They'll seem as absurd as cartoons, full of crazy impossibilities." That's what I wrote in an essay for Miss Perry.

On my birthday morning as soon as I opened the curtain along my bunk Mum and Dad were waiting with smiles on their faces, holding out between them . . . nothing. They acted as though that nothing was large and spherical and maybe breakable too.

"Here's a special present for a very special girl!" exclaimed Dad.

"It's the world," said Mum. "It's the planet Earth. We're giving it to you. No one gave their daughter the whole world before, did they? Never ever. Because no one ever did, *we can*."

I believed them. Mum and Dad weren't mocking me. This wasn't any bitter joke. It was a true expression of their love and kindness. Their gift counted for more than any other gift could possibly have done, for in that electrifying moment what they were giving me was vision. They handed me nothing, therefore I *saw*. I was overwhelmed by a sense of everything,

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and whole-someness. I felt replenished, filled with strength. You need strength to hold a world, don't you?

So I took it into my hands, careful at first. I was about to lay it down upon my bedding like some egg in a soft nest—an ostrich egg, the egg of a Roc!—when Mum protested.

"Don't hide it away. Take it out with you. Take it everywhere! No need to be shy, not now that it's yours. It had to accept *you* as well, you know? Well, now it has. So it'll go anywhere with you. You can balance it on your head if you like. It won't fall. If it does fall, it won't break so long as you always believe in it."

"Oh I shall, Mum. I shall."

"It won't become a different world, somebody else's," Dad assured me. "It can't, because it's your own, your very own."

"So long as *I* don't change, you mean?"

"So long as you don't lose it. Though to do so, you'd have to lose yourself."

That we had all lost our selves was my immediate thought. The aliens had taken our selves away from us and substituted changeling selves who were weaker, ineffective, hamstrung.

They wouldn't do that to me! My talisman was nothing they could steal, nothing they could alter, nothing they could notice. I had walked through one of those two doorways Miss Perry described, and absolutely nothing was waiting for me in the room beyond—yet at the same time I had received, secretly, everything that mattered.

Arriving at school, I placed the world carefully on my desk so that it wouldn't roll off. The other kids watched me curiously, yet no one rushed over mischievously to shove or snatch. We weren't like that nowadays. Even so, they wouldn't have harmed my world or taken it unless I let them.

Miss Perry eyed me. "What was that about, Joan?"

I smiled. "Today's my birthday, Miss. My Mum and Dad have given me the world. Here it is." I lifted it, and set it down again. Only a few of my classmates tittered.

"Honest?" asked Jimmy Taylor. "Can I hold it for a mo?" Before Miss Perry could react Jimmy had left his desk. He placed his hands where mine had been.

"Hey, it is too! I feel it. Like a balloon, in' it?" He tried to lift it, but couldn't, and frowned.

Miss Perry descended upon us. Jimmy skipped back to his seat. She faltered; her hands fluttered like birds caught in a net. "May *I*?"

When I nodded, Miss Perry spread her hands wide as the desk itself. At first her palms came together ever so slowly as if she were appre-

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hensive that she might touch . . . either something, or alternatively nothing. Next, she seemed about to clap a mosquito between those two hands of hers as if her hands were a spring trap which might fly together, triggered by a tickle, exploding my birthday present, popping it with a smack of flesh on flesh. She might *imagine* she was assessing whether to burst my dream for my sake, or whether to let me keep it, also for my sake. Oh, she might imagine this, but I saw deeper: all the way inside her to her fearful desire for Jimmy to have been serious, not spoofing, to her yearning for this truly to be the world, and her fear that it wasn't, and her twin fear: *that it was.* Her hands stalled just where I knew the surface of the world to be.

"It's," she murmured. "Yes it is, it is." At that moment she too had opened a door in herself and had discovered, within, a nothing which possessed more substance than she could have thought possible five minutes earlier. All my other classmates came and touched the world, with cautious wonder. I suspected one or two of pretending so as not to seem empty inside. Once everyone had returned to their seats, and Miss Perry to the front, I lifted my world fussily to reposition it. Before, I had hardly noticed the slightest weight, if any. Now my world seemed a bit heavy.

At mid-morning break we spilled out into the marketplace, bathed in cool April sunshine, me with my world. Word about it spread quickly through the school population. Soon a stream of kids was coming up to me. "Joan, Joan, may we?" Seniors proved shyer than juniors—afraid, as Miss Perry had been afraid at first.

Those older kids who missed their chance seized it at lunch time. That day, the school canteen was dishing up bowls of thick pea and ham soup with wedges of wholemeal bread. I had to balance the world on my head to carry the meal back to the classroom, stooping when I stepped through a doorway. I was stopped by so many seniors wanting to reach above my head that my soup was lukewarm by the time I got down to it.

When school ended, color was fast fading from the sky and some rainy-looking clouds were arriving to wash the afternoon away. The market had already packed up. Would a world balanced upon my head act as an umbrella? Probably not, on account of the shape. Rain would run around in little seas and soak my crown. Raindrops might simply pass straight through like radiation because they couldn't notice the world in their way.

During a shower you mightn't notice rain slicking the world, but how about when the year rolled round to winter and snow fell? Would the flakes cling? Would I wear a great cold snowball on my head, the world in a new ice age?

Jimmy offered to carry the world back home for me, but of course I

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couldn't let him. With all the kids touching it, the weight had grown noticeably. Yet I wasn't struggling. The world wasn't a pail, empty to start with and now half full of water. I felt no physical strain, just a sense of increase. As if to compensate, my hands were buoyed up.

Earlier in the day, when I was new to having a world, perhaps I could have let Jimmy take it. Not now, no longer. I should have loathed for the skin to be torn from his hands, and burned, for his foot to be crushed by the fall of the world. He walked with me, chatting about how fine it must be to have such a Mum and Dad.

"If only mine would give me," he began. "I guess they can't. Yours is the only one."

"How was it at school today?" Dad had been watching some film about Romans and gladiators which he now switched off. His tone was light yet I heard the underlying anxious note. Mum waited too, either to wreathe her face in smiles, or be sad.

I lowered the world gently onto my bunk, where it didn't make a hollow in the bedding, though that didn't matter. The blanket couldn't feel the weight of the world the way I could.

"It was so wonderful!" I told them. "Everyone touched my world. Miss Perry, everybody."

My parents' faces swelled with joy, each like some toddler's crayon drawing of a radiant, beaming sun. We hugged, all three of us.

By the end of the following day most of the adults in the camp appeared to have heard the news. During break, at least fifty grown-ups asked to touch. Though no traders were present that day, the marketplace was packed with people after school. It took me ages to get home. Families and stray individuals kept knocking at our caravan for a couple of hours more. I had to lift the world dozens of times and carry it to the door. My world seemed as heavy as a horse by now, though somehow it continued to be no burden.

Most people's reaction was one of calm delight. A few shed tears, which was embarrassing. One or two grumbled. Maybe those were the grumbling sort—and they'd come to me, hadn't they? Nobody asked stupid questions, or made wishes on the world, or tried to hog it longer than others. They touched, and went away satisfied.

Our final callers were the vicar, Reverend Mumfats, and the mayor of our camp, Joe Wibbits. Since it was pitch dark by now, Dad invited these special visitors inside, even though we would be cramped. I brought the world from my bunk yet again, and both the vicar and the mayor rested their palms against it, so I could tell that they weren't intending to act in a heavy-handed style.

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Reverend Mumfats sniffed; he had a cold. "Where did you get it from, Joan?"

"From Mum and Dad, as a birthday gift."

"Ah, but where did they get it from? Where, Mr. Archer, Mrs. Archer, where? And how? Was it from God?"

Mum didn't believe in Mumfats' God yet she didn't wish to offend, so she chose her words.

"It came into our minds to give it to Joan. So we did. At the time we gave it, you'd hardly have known it was there."

"Now it is," growled Mr. Wibbits. "Oh yes. I felt it, same as you did, Vicar. Joan, we really called here to ask . . . not about your plans, oh no." He barked a laugh. "Wouldn't wish to use that word, would we? What I'm saying—"

"A moment," interrupted Mumfats. "Does it . . . *progress*, would you say, from day to day? Similar to, um, a pregnancy? An egg underneath a hen?"

I nodded. "The more people who touch it, the heavier it grows. Yes, it gets heavier all the time."

"Oh dear." Mum looked concerned. This was the first time I'd mentioned the weight.

I explained. "It isn't your usual heaviness like a big bag of carrots being heavier than a little bag. I *know* it's heavier, you see, but I can still hold it easily so long as I feel right about holding it. Feeling right is . . . well, it's as if something's flowing through me to support it. The heavier it gets, the more flows through me."

"More power of the spirit?" suggested Mumfats.

"Energy, that's what!" said Dad.

"What *I'm* saying," resumed Mr. Wibbits, "is there's a bus service into town on Saturdays, if you take my meaning."

Personally I suspected that my world might be immune to the "empty room" effect. Mr. Wibbits wasn't taking chances by making dramatic pronouncements, nevertheless the Saturday morning bus was over half full, to the surprise of the driver. Mr. Wibbits himself was on board, and the vicar, and my Mum and Dad, and Jimmy and his Dad, and oh a good thirty others. I sat by Dad with the world in my lap as the bus lurched along the potholed road past fields grazed by sheep, rooted by pigs, or gone to wilderness. We picked up a few extra passengers from villages en route. Of course I had to let them touch the world.

For once, town wasn't depressing and colorless, even when the day grew overcast and a chilly wind blew from the north. Miss Perry had turned out with friends to greet us. Myself, Mum and Dad, and half a dozen others established ourselves at the bus station where there was

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ample open space, a sheltered arcade, and a coffee stall. The others dispersed through the streets to spread the word. By the time our bus departed at the end of the day hundreds and hundreds more people had laid their hands on the world.

I felt it was a start.

How did it feel to sleep with the world every night, to bunk up with it? I could have stowed it on the floor but I preferred to stay in contact. Sometimes I kept the world down at the bottom of my bed, with my blanketed feet splayed on either side. Sometimes I curled myself around it, knees-up-fashion. Mostly I had it up by my pillow and rested my cheek against it. When I lay in this position I thought I could hear the faintest humming sound. Not that my world was any spinning top! Even if it had been revolving at the same rate as Planet Earth, turning on its axis only once a day, I'm sure I should still have felt its slow slide against my face. Maybe the murmur was inside my own ears. I wasn't aware of my world having a temperature other than my own. Certainly it wasn't hot around the equator and cold at the poles.

Did a moon the size of an apple orbit my world invisibly and intangibly fifty feet away, swinging slowly around our caravan in the night? No, the moon was stone dead. The aliens didn't affect the moon, where nothing happened anyway.

Miss Perry suggested that I skip school on Wednesday and go into town again on the bus; which I did, accompanied by Mum and Dad, Mr. Wibbits, and others. More and more townsfolk touched the world.

Again on Saturday. By the Monday a restless new feeling was stirring in me because fresh people *weren't* constantly touching the world every single day. At our camp everyone had already done so. My parents and I held a confab with Miss Perry, the upshot of which was that Miss Perry invited me to come and stay with her in town in the house which she was sharing with three other teachers. Every morning she would drive me to school. I could lunch with Mum and Dad, so as to see them. Afterwards she would return me to town. Longer evenings were approaching. I'd be able to put in several hours of world-showing at the bus station, which was proving such a popular venue.

Within a week of this new schedule commencing, most of the town must have turned up and numbers were tailing off from thousands into hundreds. Queues still stretched around the parking apron, yet what would once have seemed an overwhelming demand was beginning to frustrate me just a tad. My world continued to grow in weight, but I could always hold it without any bother. Invitations were arriving from

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other towns and cities, spurred by travelers who had touched my world before departing and who witnessed what was happening.

A party of four scientists, from the remnants of the university twenty miles south, turned up at Miss Perry's house in a minibus packed with equipment to test my world and me; and I imagine that if TV stations had any longer transmitted news, or if newspapers still flourished, I might have been besieged by reporters as in those old movies.

Their measuring devices told them next to nothing about my world, or myself, yet they couldn't easily argue with its existence. Giles Collyweston, the team's leader, grew downright excited. He was in his sixties, with snowy hair, and his colleagues weren't much younger. Doris Dobey, a stout woman, was determined to play devil's advocate.

"This is an alien artifact," she suggested. She wore a tweed suit belted about her waist, and scuffed old brogues on her feet. I imagined her striding across a moor trying to shoot pheasants. We were in the shared lounge of the house, where the peeling purple- and gold-striped wallpaper suggested a spectrum of heathers, while the easy chairs were soft brown boulders. Dr. Dobey's thatch of grey hair might have been self-trimmed, using a pudding basin as a guide.

"At last they have sent something down to Earth—an enigma to raise false hopes and make fools of us. Or worse! When people touch this thing, it registers them. It stores their imprint. Many more people will touch it. One day it will reach out and *touch them* and, I don't know, control them, suck their personality and free will away. It's an alien weapon."

"It isn't," I told her. The pendant lamp, glass cups branching from brass arms, flickered, and shone more dimly from then on.

"How can you be sure, Joan?"

"Because it's mine."

"Has a voice been whispering in your dreams?"

"No, Mum and Dad told me. First our vicar asks if God has anything to do with it. Now you're wanting to know if aliens have been talking to me."

"It's a fair question," allowed Collyweston.

I shook my head. "I hear no voices in my head. I have my world, and I know how to hold it and believe in it. I want everyone to touch it." This was when I finally understood the sheer extent, the enormity of what I might need to do.

"Soon, we shan't be able to stop her, shall we?" asked John Imbow. A tubby effervescent fellow, he didn't seem to mind this prospect too much, though his phrasing worried me.

Doris Dobey certainly minded. "Exactly, John! Soon there'll be too much popular momentum behind her, because this seems the only hope. It's deadly dangerous."

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Who would they report back to? What could they do to stop me?

"You daren't believe any longer," I accused Dobey. "That's why you're scared. It's better for you if life just fades away."

I was afraid, too. A few weeks ago would I have argued—really argued—with a grown-up? Now if necessary I had to withstand grown-ups, however important they might be. I was also afraid because I guessed that if I didn't continue to carry my world to people an anguish would well up inside me, a trickle of pain at first, then an unbearable torrent. I didn't dare let myself be too aware of this, otherwise I might have wavered. I might have asked myself, "Could my world really be a trap?" and lost my trust in it so that suddenly it would weigh as much as I sensed that it weighed, and it would crash through my hands, through carpet, through floorboards, burying itself deep in the foundations of the teachers' house, impossible ever to lift again. Because . . . I had let it down.

The fourth member of the team, Iris Ackroyd, hadn't committed herself to an opinion. Middle-aged and scrawny, her eyes held a certain predatory gleam; yet she refrained from comment. Since the others didn't press her, perhaps this was her usual manner: to spend a long time hovering like a hawk, spying every last detail, before swooping down.

Luckily, Giles Collyweston disagreed strongly with the devil voice.

"Life," he said, "creates order; whilst the universe proceeds towards disorder. These aliens are forcing entropy upon us. I believe they're exploiting our world as a power source, a battery which will end up flat. They're drawing negentropy from the battery of human life."

"Personally I think entropy's overrated," remarked John Imbow mildly. "The universe is creative. Order evolves out of chaos. Organization emerges."

"We've heard this kind of thing from you before, Giles," Dobey said. "What are they *doing* with this stolen energy, eh?"

"I don't know. Accumulating it in their mini-moon? Building up the potential for a stargate, a tunnel through superspace by which they can come here in person? To take our world away from us confused enfeebled monkeys? Maybe their probes go out slowly to promising star systems, taking hundreds of years, and where they find life they leach the life-force of that planet by switching its world-line so that nothing energetic ever happens."

"Doesn't that activity require power, Giles? Doesn't it demand an almost Godlike power on their part to start with?"

"They may draw that power from the sun, or from the fabric of space-time itself. Yet to create a tunnel which can be traveled by conscious beings might demand—what they are doing to us. Perhaps it's a necessary sacrifice on our part, for which they'll apologize when they finally

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arrive here. Perhaps they'll compensate us. Maybe their coming will boost us all back again into a greater cosmic history. I misdoubt this. Oh, I do. We're being drained, as Africa was of its slaves, as the third world was of its raw materials and its sweated labor. Now the whole Earth's a third world, weak and poor and helpless. Yet at last the flow is reversing! Energy starts to stream back into our system through you, Joan, and your world. How, I don't know. There's a science at work here that's a thousand years beyond ours—"

"And this invisible mini-world of Joan's is a product of it," stated Dobey.

"No! I trust it. We must trust. A power, a counterforce has arisen from the human spirit."

The tweeded woman shook her head. "You're no longer a scientist, Giles. You're a dupe. You're a silly fish rising to a bright fly with a hook hidden in it. What shape is the hook? That's all I wonder."

How I wished I could provide some wonder to convince this woman, something more than my world. Yet what could be more?

Miss Perry had been sitting in on the investigation. Now my teacher erupted from one of those enveloping, camouflaging chairs like a red fox breaking cover when challenged by a hound. She rushed to the cold fireplace, whirled, and faced my interrogators.

"Joan can't stay here much longer. She needs to travel—to let everyone touch her world! Will *you* take her back to the city with you, Professor Collyweston? Will you lodge her for a while?"

"Over my dead body," said Dobey.

"Good way to keep an eye on her," suggested John Imbow. "Else, we'll miss the real start of her snowball."

"Melt it, while there's time. Put a flame to it." Did Dobey mean that literally? The dead body in question might be *mine*? Unbelievable.

"I'll explain to her parents," promised Miss Perry. I darted a look to accuse her of treachery, of delivering me into the hands of an enemy. When she frowned at me, lips pursed, I realized that betrayal was far from her intention. Supposing I set out by bus around any and every old town, accepting the touch of grateful multitudes, I might presently turn into a prig who thought she was a saint. By going initially with these scientists I would have a check on me. My "innocence" would be tested—the better to confirm it. I nodded.

So did Collyweston. "I don't imagine she'll be with us long. She'll need to move on. City's a useful place to start. Yes, I see that. I'd feel privileged."

"You'd lend the weight of your authority?"

"For what it's worth, Doris—compared with her own."

"A child!"

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"The bearer of the world. The masthead of humanity, bringing back the fire that's been stolen from us."

How confusing this image was of myself as a sort of blazing boat. My hair wasn't even red, it was fawn. I couldn't help but giggle. Dobey was right on target in that respect: I was still a young girl. Collyweston darted a quizzical glance at me, as if perhaps he had been fooled. I smiled at him, and held my world high.

"I'll need to mix with all sorts of people, won't I? Takes all sorts to remake a world. Eventually I might need to mix with everyone alive."

At last Iris Ackroyd revealed some of what she'd been thinking. "I should like to accompany you on your travels for a while, Joan—to observe and record, so that there's a true chronicle."

"Me too!" offered Imbow. "We could be a kind of uncle and aunt to you—look after your welfare, make arrangements without interfering with your own decisions."

Iris Ackroyd shrugged. She didn't view me as a substitute niece nor necessarily a savior either. She would be my watchdog, whilst back at the university Collyweston enthused about me, and Dobey tried to stonewall him and denounce me as a fraud or worse.

What with all the equipment they had brought in vain, plus my world and myself as extra cargo and passenger, we were crowded in that minibus as we bounced towards the city through the darkness with "Uncle" Imbow at the wheel, our headlights often picking up potholes too late to avoid them. The alien moon was due to fly over our part of the land at ten, so we stopped in the car park of a country pub to stretch our legs, refresh ourselves—letting the other customers touch the world—and wait on the weed-cracked tarmac to watch the transit. Our own ancient moon, three-quarters full, spilled dull milk across fields, pub, trees beyond. Sky was cloudless, night breathless; likely there'd be a late frost.

Duly at ten, the gleaming white moonlet climbed up across the black, star-studded sky; and a spark leapt from it, arcing away before hanging and brightening. As Earth's camber cut off the sunlight reflecting from space, the sparkle vanished. I could still see a faint glow in the same position, like an afterimage. But it lingered: a reddish spot. That was no afterimage. Nor did it move—which meant that whatever-it-was must be falling directly towards us!

"It's noticed," muttered Collyweston, as though we shouldn't raise our voices.

"Dear God," exclaimed Imbow. "Let's take cover."

"If it intends to destroy her, what cover could we possibly take, man?"

"If it *wants* to harm her," Dobey said. "Maybe she's doing its work very nicely, thank you. Maybe it's after the doubters: me and Iris."

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"Me?" asked Ackroyd archly.

Dobey headed towards the pub door, then hitched her shoulders and paused to watch.

The object wasn't larger yet seemed more substantial, as if a giant balloon were sinking rapidly, approaching closer but also shrinking as denser air pressed upon it.

"Rubbish, Doris," called Collyweston. "It wants to nip her in the bud, that's what."

Now the thing was like a ruddy, angry boil on somebody's neck. Was it a flake off the alien moon? A ship? A bomb? I held my world defiantly above my head, towards it, willing my world to protect us and shelter us somehow. The oven-glow swelled to eclipse a pool of stars, and hung above us.

Of a sudden the pub was a heap of tumbled stones. Broken bones of rafters jutted amidst stumps of walls.

Almost immediately the building was intact again, as before. The red disc pulsed, lighting the car park eerily—a car park no more, but only a shrubby heath with no sign of a building in sight. Car park and pub returned. Forest crowded about us—for moments. A waste of water hemmed us in, where we stood on a weedy hummock of mud. A towering shape crashed through ferns which were the size of trees, screeching, teeth biting at the stars. Battle erupted: mounted soldiers wearing weird plumed helmets wielding curved swords. How fiercely I clutched my world overhead as a shield—in that car park outside that pub. The boil in the sky vanished; the shining white alien moon dipped below the horizon.

As we drove on towards the city, Collyweston rejoiced.

"It tried to force you onto another world-line, Joan. It tried to expel you, but it couldn't! Not even this early in the game. So we've won, already we've won. Just provided—" He hesitated.

"Provided," said Imbow, "that she spends the rest of her life carrying her world to everywhere on Earth, this country, every country, till sufficient millions of people have touched it, till it weighs as much to her as the real planet. Are you up to it, Joan? Summer and winter, well or sick?"

"If I don't," I mumbled, "it'll hurt me."

He misunderstood. "I don't think they can harm you now. They might try other tricks, but surely they played their best card first. Let's just take care when their moon's in the sky."

"You fools," cried Dobey. "Can't you see what a mock attack this was? What a feeble, deliberate failure? Oh yes: to convince the natives that their last hope is the true one, so that they'll tamely lay tens of millions

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of hands on this world of hers, instead of burying it in a deep pit! Surely there were more devastating ways of attacking?"

"How could there be?" Collyweston asked her. "Missiles: is that what you mean? You know why *we* can't. Therefore neither can they. They could only try to jerk the world-line, Joan's world-line and ours, to unravel it from the rest. To pull it loose and tie it to a different universe."

"You're wrong!" I shouted at Dobey. "You are, you are! I know my world."

"It won't let you stop, will it?"

"*I shan't let myself stop. If it takes me all my years.*" Penny piece after penny piece, till all were spent, the price to pay for our freedom.

"At least you'll get to see the real wide world," she sneered, "even if none of us ever sees *yours* until it's too late. Until it shows its true colors at last, with all our millions of selves mirrored in it, captured in it."

The spires of the city rose black against the stars as John Imbow steered us into the dim suburbs.

Next morning when the frost had melted I went with John and Iris to the city bus station to hold my world out to everyone who passed, and soon to everybody who came intentionally.

Joy lit my heart as if the sun in the sky were shining through me. Energy coursed through the muscles of my arms, my wrists, my fingers as if I were being nourished by the sunlight. I felt that Mum and Dad must surely sense my happiness from twenty miles away, and must be grinning too, for how could they have lost me now? They too had touched my world, indeed had been the first. Whilst I held my world, I held Mum and Dad in my embrace, and everybody I'd grown up with in our camp, likewise thousands of others; and eventually I would hug tens of millions of people, and they me, all by a simple trustful touch. We would all have joined hands, to strike the sky. Our reach would be enormous, and gentle, and strong. ●

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AT A WORKSITE IN THE RUINS OF GANYMEDE

The domed site is abandoned by those hungry for news.
A caterpillar is due from Dyson City, a daredevil that
braves
trick ices and unmapped chasms to bring supplies each
year.
The archaeologist expects more tragedies in his mail from
home,
and this delivery is not his ride out, so he chooses to stay
in the courtyard at the digging's heart and ponder his
work.
He's struck by a complex tile pattern, how grid-like it
seems,
similar to the security codes or access entries on a
compunet.
Walking the tiles like a honeybee performing for its hive,
a portal opens, a breeze stale with centuries bubbles up.
For a moment he travels with it, fugues beneath Jupiter's
glow.
An ancient race lights his imagination, then wafts past him,
gone.

—Robert Frazier

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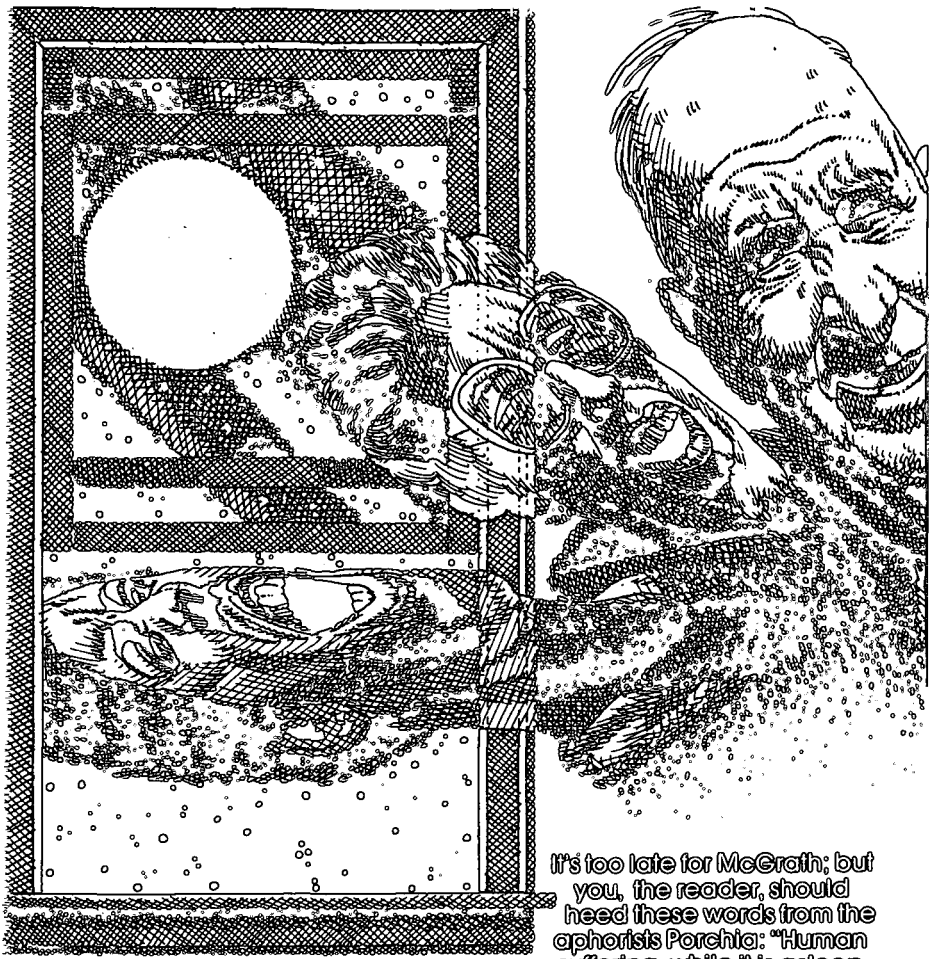

It's too late for McGrath; but you, the reader, should heed these words from the aphorists Porchia: "Human suffering, while it is asleep, is shapeless. If it is wakened it takes the form of the waker."

art: Terry Lee

THE FUNCTION OF DREAM SLEEP

by Harlan Ellison

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McGrath awoke suddenly, just in time to see a huge mouth filled with small, sharp teeth closing in his side. In an instant it was gone, even as he shook himself awake.

Had he not been staring at the flesh, at the moment his eyes opened from sleep, he would have missed the faintest pink line of closure that remained only another heartbeat, then faded and was gone, leaving no indication the mouth had ever existed; a second—secret—mouth hiding in his skin.

At first he was sure he had wakened from a particularly nasty dream. But the memory of the thing that had escaped from within him, through the mouth, was a real memory—not a wisp of fading nightmare. He had *felt* the chilly passage of something rushing out of him. Like cold air from a leaking balloon. Like a chill down a hallway from a window left open in a distant room. And he had *seen* the mouth. It lay across the ribs vertically, just below his left nipple, running down to the bulge of fat parallel to his navel. Down his left side there had been a lipless mouth filled with teeth; and it had been open to permit a breeze of something to leave his body.

McGrath sat up on the bed. He was shaking. The Tensor lamp was still on, the paperback novel tented open on the sheet beside him, his body naked and perspiring in the August heat. The Tensor had been aimed directly at his side, bathing his flesh with light, when he had unexpectedly opened his eyes; and in that waking moment he had surprised his body in the act of opening its secret mouth.

He couldn't stop the trembling, and when the phone rang he had to steel himself to lift the receiver.

"Hello," he heard himself say, in someone else's voice.

"Lonny," said Victor Kayley's widow, "I'm sorry to disturb you at this hour . . ."

"It's okay," he said. Victor had died the day before yesterday. Sally relied on him for the arrangements, and hours of solace he didn't begrudge. Years before, Sally and he . . . then she drifted toward Victor, who had been McGrath's oldest, closest . . . they were drawn to each other more and more sweetly till . . . and finally, McGrath had taken them both to dinner at the old Steuben Tavern on West 47th, that dear old Steuben Tavern with its dark wood booths and sensational schnitzel, now gone, torn down and gone like so much else that was . . . and he had made them sit side by side in the booth across from him, and he took their hands in his . . . I love you both so much, he had said . . . I see the way you move when you're around each other . . . you're both my dearest friends, you put light in my world . . . and he laid their hands together under his, and he grinned at them for their nervousness . . .

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"Are you all right; you sound so, I don't know, so *strained*?" Her voice was wide awake. But concerned.

"I'm, yeah, I'm okay. I just had the weirdest, I was dozing, fell asleep reading, and I had this, this *weird*—" He trailed off. Then went back at it, more sternly: "I'm okay. It was a scary dream."

There was, then, a long measure of silence between them. Only the open line, with the sound of ions decaying.

"Are *you* okay?" he said, thinking of the funeral service day after tomorrow. She had asked him to select the casket. The anodized pink aluminum "unit" they had tried to get him to go for, doing a bait-and-switch, had nauseated him. McGrath had settled on a simple copper casket, shrugging away suggestions by the Bereavement Counselor in the Casket Selection Parlor that "consideration and thoughtfulness for the departed" might better be served by the Monaco, a "Duraseal metal unit with Sea Mist Polished Finish, interior richly lined in 600 Aqua Supreme Cheney velvet, magnificently quilted and shirred, with matching jumbo bolster and coverlet."

"I couldn't sleep," she said. "I was watching television, and they had a thing about the echidna, the Australian anteater, you know . . . ?" He made a sound that indicated he knew. "And Vic never got over the trip we took to the Flinders Range in '82, and he just loved the Australian animals, and I turned in the bed to see him smiling . . ."

She began to cry.

He could feel his throat closing. He knew. The turning to tell your best friend something you'd just seen together, to get the reinforcement, the input, the expression on his face. And there was no face. There was emptiness in that place. He knew. He'd turned to Victor three dozen times in the past two days. Turned, to confront emptiness. Oh, he knew, all right.

"Sally," he murmured. "Sally, I know; I know."

She pulled herself together, snuffled herself unclogged and cleared her throat. "It's okay. I'm fine. It was just a second there . . .

"Try to get some sleep. We have to do stuff tomorrow."

"Of course," she said, sounding really quite all right. "I'll go back to bed. I'm sorry." He told her to shut up, if you couldn't call a friend at that hour to talk about the echidna, who the hell *could* you call?

"Jerry Falwell," she said. "If I have to annoy someone at three in the morning, better it should be a shit like him." They laughed quickly and emptily, she said good night and told him he had been much loved by both of them, he said I know that, and they hung up.

Lonny McGrath lay there, the paperback still tented at his side, the Tensor still warming his flesh, the sheets still soggy from the humidity, and he stared at the far wall of the bedroom on whose surface, like the

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surface of his skin, there lay no evidence whatever of secret mouths filled with teeth.

"I can't get it out of my mind."

Dr. Jess ran her fingers down his side, looked closer. "Well, it *is* red; but that's more chafing than anything out of Stephen King."

"It's red because I keep rubbing it. I'm getting obsessive about it. And don't make fun, Jess. I can't get it out of my mind."

She sighed and raked a hand back through her thick auburn hair. "Sorry." She got up and walked to the window in the examination room. Then, as an afterthought, she said, "You can get dressed." She stared out the window as McGrath hopped off the physical therapy table, nearly catching his heel on the retractable step. He partially folded the stiff paper gown that had covered his lap, and laid it on the padded seat. As he pulled up his undershorts, Dr. Jess turned and stared at him. He thought for the hundredth time that his initial fears, years before, at being examined by a female physician, had been foolish. His friend looked at him with concern, but without the *look* that passed between men and women. "How long has it been since Victor died?"

"Three months, almost."

"And Emily?"

"Six months."

"And Steve and Melanie's son?"

"Oh, Christ, Jess!"

She pursed her lips. "Look, Lonny, I'm not a psychotherapist, but even I can see that all these deaths of friends is getting to you. Maybe you don't even see it, but you used the right word: obsessive. *No*body can sustain so much pain, over so brief a period, the loss of so many loved ones, without going into a spiral."

"What did the x-rays show?"

"I told you."

"But there might've been *some*thing. Some lesion, or inflammation; an irregularity in the dermis . . . *some*thing!"

"Lonny. Come *on*! I've never lied to you. You looked at them with me, did *you* see anything?" He sighed deeply, shook his head. She spread her hands as if to say, well, there you are, I can't make something sick where nothing sick exists. "I can work on your soft prostate, and I can give you a shot of cortisone in the ball joint where that cop worked you over; but I can't treat something out of a penny dreadful novel that doesn't leave any trace."

"You think I need a shrink?"

She turned back to the window. "This is your third visit, Lonny. You're my pal, kiddo, but I think you need to get counseling of a different sort."

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McGrath knotted his tie and drew it up, spreading the wings of his shirt collar with his little fingers. She didn't turn around. "I'm worried about you, Lonny. You ought to be married."

"I *was* married. You're not talking wife, anyway. You're talking keeper." She didn't turn. He pulled on his jacket, and waited. Finally, with his hand on the doorknob, he said, "Maybe you're right. I've never been a melancholy sort, but all this . . . so many, in so short a time . . . maybe you're right."

He opened the door. She looked out the window. "We'll talk." He started out, and without turning, she said, "There won't be a charge for this visit."

He smiled thinly, not at all happily. But she didn't see it.

He called Tommy and begged off from work. Tommy went into a snit. "I'm up to my ass, Lonny," he said, affecting his Dowager Empress tone. "This is Black goddam Friday! The Eroica! That Fahrenheit woman, Farrenstock, whatever the hell it is . . ."

"Fahnestock," Lonny said, smiling for the first time in days. "I thought we'd seen the last of her when you suggested she look into the possibility of a leper sitting on her face."

Tommy sighed. "The grotesque bitch is simply a glutton. I swear to God she must be into bondage; the worse I treat her, the more often she comes in."

"What'd she bring this time?"

"Another half dozen of those tacky petit-point things. I can barely bring myself to look at them. Bleeding martyrs and scenes of culturally depressed areas in, I suppose, Iowa or Indiana. Illinois, Idaho, I don't know: one of those places that begins with an I, teeming with people who bowl."

Lonny always wound up framing Mrs. Fahnestock's gaucheries. Tommy always took one look, then went upstairs in back of the framing shop to lie down for a while. McGrath had asked the matron once, what she did with all of them. She replied that she gave them as gifts. Tommy, when he heard, fell to his knees and prayed to a God in which he did not believe that the woman would never hold him in enough esteem to feel he deserved such a gift. But she spent, oh my, how she spent.

"Let me guess," McGrath said. "She wants them blocked so tightly you could bounce a dime off them, with a fabric liner, a basic pearl matte, and the black lacquer frame from Chapin Molding. Right?"

"Yes, of course, right. Which is *another* reason your slacker behavior is particularly distressing. The truck from Chapin just dropped off a hundred feet of the oval top walnut molding. It's got to be unpacked, the footage measured, and put away. You *can't* take the day off."

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"Tommy, don't whip the guilt on me. I'm a goy, remember?"

"If it weren't for guilt, the *goyim* would have wiped us out three thousand years ago. It's more effective than a Star Wars defense system." He puffed air through his lips for a moment, measuring how much he would *actually* be inconvenienced by his assistant's absence. "Monday morning? Early?"

McGrath said, "I'll be there no later than eight o'clock. I'll do the petit-points first."

"All right. And by the way, you sound awful. D'you know the worst part about being an Atheist?"

Lonny smiled. Tommy would feel it was a closed bargain if he could pass on one of his horrendous jokes. "No, what's the worst part about being an Atheist?"

"You've got no one to talk to when you're fucking."

Lonny roared, silently. There was no need to give him the satisfaction. But Tommy knew. He couldn't see him, but Lonny knew he was grinning broadly at the other end of the line. "So long, Tommy. See you Monday."

He racked the receiver in the phone booth and looked across Pico Boulevard at the office building. He had lived in Los Angeles for eleven years, since he and Victor and Sally had fled New York, and he still couldn't get used to the golden patina that lay over the days here. Except when it rained, at which times the inclemency seemed so alien he had visions of giant mushrooms sprouting from the sidewalks. The office building was unimpressive, just three storeys high and brick; but a late afternoon shadow lay across its face, and it recalled for him the eighteen frontal views of the Rouen Cathedral that Monet had painted during the winter months of 1892 and 1893: the same façade, following the light from early morning till sunset. He had seen the Monet exhibition at MOMA. Then he remembered with whom he had taken in that exhibition, and he felt again the passage of chill leaving his body through that secret mouth. He stepped out of the booth and just wanted to go somewhere and cry. *Stop it!* he said inside. *Knock it off.* He swiped at the corner of his eye, and crossed the street. He passed through the shadow that cut the sidewalk.

Inside the tiny lobby he consulted the glass-paneled wall register. Mostly, the building housed dentists and philatelists, as best he could tell. But against the ribbed black panel he read the little white plastic letters that had been darted in to include THE REM GROUP 306. He walked up the stairs.

To find 306, he had to make a choice: go left or go right. There were no office location arrows on the wall. He went to the right, and was pleased. As the numbers went down, he began to hear someone speaking rather loudly. "Sleep is of several kinds. Dream sleep, or rapid eye move-

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ment sleep—what we call REM sleep, and thus the name of our group—is predominantly found in mammals who bring forth living young, rather than eggs. Some birds and reptiles, as well."

McGrath stood outside the glass-paneled door to 306, and he listened. *Viviparous mammals,* he thought. He could now discern that the speaker was a woman; and her use of "living young, rather than eggs" instead of *viviparous* convinced him she was addressing one or more laypersons. *The echidna,* he thought. *A familiar viviparous mammal.*

"We now believe dreams originate in the brain's neocortex. Dreams have been used to attempt to foretell the future. Freud used dreams to explore the unconscious mind. Jung thought dreams formed a bridge of communication between the conscious and the unconscious." *It wasn't a dream,* McGrath thought. *I was awake. I know the difference.*

The woman was saying, ". . . those who try to make dreams work for them, to create poetry, to solve problems; and it's generally thought that dreams aid in consolidating memories. How many of you believe that if you can only *remember* the dream when you waken, that you will understand something very important, or regain some special memory you've lost?"

How many of you. McGrath now understood that the dream therapy group was in session. Late on a Friday afternoon? It would have to be women in their thirties, forties.

He opened the door, to see if he was correct.

With their hands in the air, indicating they believed the capturing of a dream on awakening would bring back an old memory, all six of the women in the room, not one of them older than forty, turned to stare at McGrath as he entered. He closed the door behind him, and said, "I don't agree. I think we dream to forget. And sometimes it doesn't work."

He was looking at the woman standing in front of the six hand-raised members of the group. She stared back at him for a long moment, and all six heads turned back to her. Their hands were frozen in the air. The woman who had been speaking settled back till she was perched on the edge of her desk.

"Mr. McGrath?"

"Yes. I'm sorry I'm late. It's been a day."

She smiled quickly, totally in command, putting him at ease. "I'm Anna Picket. Tricia said you'd probably be along today. Please grab a chair."

McGrath nodded and took a folding chair from the three remaining against the wall. He unfolded it and set it at the far left of the semicircle. The six well-tended, expensively-coiffed heads remained turned toward him as, one by one, the hands came down.

He wasn't at all sure letting his ex-wife call this Anna Picket, to get

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him into the group, had been such a good idea. They had remained friends after the divorce, and he trusted her judgment. Though he had never availed himself of her services after they'd separated and she had gone for her degree at UCLA, he'd been assured that Tricia was as good a family counseling therapist as one could find in Southern California. He had been shocked when she'd suggested a dream group. But he'd come: he had walked through the area most of the early part of the day, trying to decide if he wanted to do this, share what he'd experienced with total strangers; walked through the area stopping in at this shop and that boutique, having some gelato and shaking his head at how this neighborhood had been "gentrified," how it had changed so radically, how all the wonderful small tradesmen who had flourished here had been driven out by geysering rents; walked through the area growing more and more despondent at how nothing lasted, how joy was drained away shop by shop, neighborhood by neighborhood, person by . . .

Until one was left alone.

Standing on an empty plain. The dark wind blowing from the horizon. Cold, empty, dark: with the knowledge that a pit of eternal loneliness lay just over that horizon, and that the frightening wind that blew up out of the pit would never cease. That one would stand there, all alone, on the empty plain, as one after another of the ones you loved were erased in a second.

Had walked through the area, all day, and finally had called Tommy, and finally had allowed Tricia's wisdom to lead him, and here he sat, in a folding straight-back chair, asking a total stranger to repeat what she had just said.

"I asked why you didn't agree with the group, that remembering dreams is a good thing?" She arched an eyebrow, and tilted her head.

McGrath felt uncomfortable for a moment. He blushed. It was something that had always caused him embarrassment. "Well," he said slowly, "I don't want to seem like a smart aleck, one of those people who reads some popularized bit of science and then comes on like an authority . . ."

She smiled at his consternation, the flush of his cheeks. "Please, Mr. McGrath, that's quite all right. Where dreams are concerned, we're *all* journeyists. What did you read?"

"The Crick-Mitchison theory. The paper on 'unlearning.' I don't know, it just seemed, well, *reasonable* to me."

One of the women asked what that was.

Anna Picket said, "Dr. Sir Francis Crick, you'll know of him because he won the Nobel Prize for his work with DNA; and Graeme Mitchison, he's a highly respected brain researcher at Cambridge. Their experiments in the early 1980s. They postulate that we dream to forget, not to remember."

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"The best way I understood it," McGrath said, "was using the analogy of cleaning out an office building at night, after all the workers are gone. Outdated reports are trashed, computer dump sheets are shredded, old memos tossed with the refuse. Every night our brains get cleaned during the one to two hours of REM sleep. The dreams pick up after us every day, sweep out the unnecessary, untrue, or just plain silly memories that could keep us from storing the important memories, or might keep us from rational thinking when we're awake. *Remembering* the dreams would be counter-productive, since the brain is trying to unlearn all that crap so we function better."

Anna Picket smiled. "You were sent from heaven, Mr. McGrath. I was going precisely to that theory when you came in. You've saved me a great deal of explanation."

One of the six women said, "Then you don't *want* us to write down our dreams and bring them in for discussion? I even put a tape recorder by the bed. For instance, I had a dream just last night in which my bicycle . . ."

He sat through the entire session, listening to things that infuriated him. They were so self-indulgent, making of the most minor inconveniences in their lives, mountains impossible to conquer. They were so different from the women he knew. They seemed to be antiquated creatures from some primitive time, confused by changing times and the demand on them to be utterly responsible for their existence. They seemed to want succor, to be told that there were greater forces at work in their world; powers and pressures and even conspiracies that existed solely to keep them nervous, uncomfortable, and helpless. Five of the six were divorcées, and only one of the five had a full time job: selling real estate. The sixth was the daughter of an organized crime figure. McGrath felt no link with them. He didn't need a group therapy session. His life was as full as he wanted it to be . . . except that he was now always scared, and lost, and constantly depressed. Perhaps Dr. Jess was dead on target. Perhaps he *did* need a shrink.

He was certain he did not need Anna Picket and her well-tailored ladies whose greatest *real* anguish was making sure they got home in time to turn on the sprinklers.

When the session ended, he started toward the door without saying anything to the Picket woman. She was surrounded by the six. But she gently edged them aside and called to him, "Mr. McGrath, would you wait a moment? I'd like to speak to you." He took his hand off the doorknob, and went back to his chair. He bit the soft flesh of his inner cheek, annoyed.

She blew them off like dandelion fluff, far more quickly than McGrath

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thought possible, and did it without their taking it as rejection. In less than five minutes he was alone in the office with the dream therapist.

She closed the door behind the Mafia Princess and locked it. For a deranged moment he thought . . . but it passed, and the look on her face was concern, not lust. He started to rise. She laid a palm against the air, stopping him. He sank back onto the folding chair.

Then Anna Picket came to him and said, "For McGrath hath murdered sleep." He stared up at her as she put her left hand behind his head, cupping the nape with fingers extending up under his hair along the curve of the skull. "Don't be nervous, this'll be all right," she said, laying her right hand with the palm against his right cheek, the spread thumb and index finger bracketing an eye he tried mightily not to blink. Her thumb lay alongside his nose, the tip curving onto the bridge. The forefinger lay across the bony eye-ridge.

She pursed her lips, then sighed deeply. In a moment her body twitched with an involuntary rictus, and she gasped, as if she had had the wind knocked out of her. McGrath couldn't move. He could feel the strength of her hands cradling his head, and the tremors of—he wanted to say—*passion* slamming through her. Not the passion of strong amorous feeling, but passion in the sense of being acted upon by something external, something alien to one's nature.

The trembling in her grew more pronounced, and McGrath had the sense that power was being drained out of him, pouring into her, that it had reached saturation level and was leaking back along the system into him, but changed, more dangerous. But why dangerous? She was spasming now, her eyes closed, her head thrown back and to the side, her thick mass of hair swaying and bobbing as she jerked, a human double-circuit high-voltage tower about to overload.

She moaned softly, in pain, without the slightest trace of subliminal pleasure, and he could see she was biting her lower lip so fiercely that blood was beginning to coat her mouth. When the pain he saw in her face became more than he could bear, he reached up quickly and took her hands away with difficulty; breaking the circuit.

Anna Picket's legs went out and she keeled toward him. He tried to brace himself, but she hit him with full dead weight, and they went crashing to the floor entangled in the metal folding chair.

Frightened, thinking insanely *what if someone comes in and sees us like this, they'd think I was molesting her,* and in the next instant thinking with relief *she locked the door,* and in the next instant his fear was transmogrified into concern for her. He rolled out from under her trembling body, taking the chair with him, wrapped around one ankle. He shook off the chair, and got to his knees. Her eyes were half-closed, the lids flickering so rapidly she might have been in the line of strobe lights.

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He hauled her around, settling her semi-upright with her head in his lap. He brushed the hair from her face, and shook her ever so lightly, because he had no water, and had no moist washcloth. Her breathing slowed, her chest heaved not quite so spastically, and her hand, flung away from her body, began to flex the fingers.

"Ms. Picket," he whispered, "can you talk? Are you all right? Is there some medicine you need . . . in your desk?"

She opened her eyes, then, and looked up at him. She tasted the blood on her lips and continued breathing raggedly, as though she had run a great distance. And finally she said, "I could feel it in you when you walked in."

He tried to ask what it was she had felt, what it was in him that had so unhinged her, but she reached in with the flexing hand and touched his forearm.

"You'll have to come with me."

"Where?"

"To meet the *real* REM Group."

And she began to cry. He knew immediately that she was weeping for him, and he nodded that he would come with her. She tried to smile reassurance, but there was still too much pain in her. They stayed that way for a time, and then they left the office building together.

They were impaired, every one of them in the sprawling ranch-style house in Hidden Hills. One was blind, another had only one hand. A third looked as if she had been in a terrible fire and had lost half her face, and another propelled herself through the house on a small wheeled platform with restraining bars to keep her from falling off.

They had taken the San Diego Freeway to the Ventura, and had driven west on 101 to the Calabasas exit. Climbing, then dropping behind the hills, they had turned up a side road that became a dirt road that became a horse path, Lonny driving Anna Picket's '85 Le Sabre.

The house lay within a bowl, completely concealed, even from the dirt road below. The horse trail passed behind low hills covered with mesquite and coast live oak, and abruptly became a perfectly surfaced blacktop. Like the roads Hearst had had cut in the hills leading up to San Simeon, concealing access to the Castle from the Coast Highway above Cambria, the blacktop had been poured on spiral rising cuts laid on a reverse bias.

Unless sought from the air, the enormous ranch house and its outbuildings and grounds would be unknown even to the most adventurous picnicker. "How much of this acreage do you own?" McGrath asked, circling down the inside of the bowl.

"All this," she said, waving an arm across the empty hills, "almost to the edge of Ventura County."

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She had recovered completely, but had said very little during the hour and a half trip, even during the heaviest weekend traffic on the 101 Freeway crawling like a million-wheeled worm through the San Fernando Valley out of Los Angeles. "Not a lot of casual drop-ins I should imagine," he replied. She looked at him across the front seat, fully for the first time since leaving Santa Monica. "I hope you'll have faith in me, trust me just a while longer," she said.

He paid strict attention to the driving.

He had been cramped within the Buick by a kind of dull fear that strangely reminded him of how he had always felt on Christmas Eve, as a child, lying in bed, afraid of, yet anxious for, the sleep that permitted Santa Claus to come.

In that house below lay something that knew of secret mouths and ancient winds from within. Had he not trusted her, he would have slammed the brake pedal and leaped from the car and not stopped running till he had reached the freeway.

And once inside the house, seeing all of them, so ruined and tragic, he was helpless to do anything but allow her to lead him to a large sitting-room, where a circle of comfortable overstuffed chairs formed a pattern that made the fear more overwhelming.

They came, then, in twos and threes, the legless woman on the rolling cart propelling herself into the center of the ring. He sat there and watched them come, and his heart seemed to press against his chest. McGrath, as a young man, had gone to a Judy Garland film festival at the Thalia in New York. One of the revived movies had been *A Child Is Waiting,* a non-singing role for Judy, a film about retarded children. Sally had had to help him out of the theater only halfway through. He could not see through his tears. His capacity for bearing the anguish of the crippled, particularly children, was less than that of most people. He brought himself up short: why had he thought of that afternoon at the Thalia now? These weren't children. They were adults. All of them. Every woman in the house was at least as old as he, surely older. Why had he been thinking of them as children?

Anna Picket took the chair beside him, and looked around the circle. One chair was empty. "Catherine?" she asked.

The blind woman said, "She died on Sunday."

Anna closed her eyes and sank back into the chair. "God be with her, and her pain ended."

They sat quietly for a time, until the woman on the cart looked up at McGrath, smiled a very kind smile, and said, "What is your name, young man?"

"Lonny," McGrath said. He watched as she rolled herself to his feet and put a hand on his knee. He felt warmth flow through him, and his

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fear melted. But it only lasted for a moment, as she trembled and moaned softly, as Anna Picket had done in the office. Anna quickly rose and drew her away from McGrath. There were tears in the cart-woman's eyes.

A woman with gray hair and involuntary head tremors, indicative of Parkinson's, leaned forward and said, "Lonny, tell us."

He started to say *tell you what?* but she held up a finger and said the same thing again.

So he told them. As best he could. Putting words to feelings that always sounded melodramatic; words that were wholly inadequate for the tidal wave of sorrow that held him down in darkness. "I miss them, oh God how I miss them," he said, twisting his hands. "I've never been like this. My mother died, and I was lost, I was miserable, yes there was a feeling my heart would break, because I loved her. But I could *handle* it. I could comfort my father and my sister, I had it in me to do that. But these last two years . . . one after another . . . so many who were close to me . . . pieces of my past, my life . . . friends I'd shared times with, and now those times are gone, they slip away as I try to think of them. I, I just don't know *what to do.*"

And he spoke of the mouth. The teeth. The closing of that mouth. The wind that had escaped from inside him.

"Did you ever sleepwalk, as a child?" a woman with a clubfoot asked. He said: yes, but only once. Tell us, they said.

"It was nothing. I was a little boy, maybe ten or eleven. My father found me standing in the hallway outside my bedroom, at the head of the stairs. I was asleep, and I was looking at the wall. I said, 'I don't see it here anywhere.' My father told me I'd said that; the next morning he told me. He took me back to bed. That was the only time, as best I know."

The women murmured around the circle to each other. Then the woman with Parkinson's said, "No, I don't think that's anything." Then she stood up, and came to him. She laid a hand on his forehead and said, "Go to sleep, Lonny."

And he blinked once, and suddenly sat bolt upright. But it wasn't an instant, it had been much longer. He had been asleep. For a long while. He knew it was so instantly, because it was now dark outside the house, and the women looked as if they had been savaged by living jungles. The blind woman was bleeding from her eyes and ears; the woman on the cart had fallen over, lay unconscious at his feet; in the chair where the fire victim had sat, there was now only a charred outline of a human being, still faintly smoking.

McGrath leaped to his feet. He looked about wildly. He didn't know what to do to help them. Beside him, Anna Picket lay slumped across the bolster arm of the chair, her body twisted and blood once again speckling her lips.

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Then he realized: the woman who had touched him, the woman with Parkinson's, was gone.

They began to whimper, and several of them moved, their hands idly touching the air. A woman who had no nose tried to rise, slipped and fell. He rushed to her, helped her back into the chair, and he realized she was missing fingers on both hands. Leprosy . . . *no!* Hansen's disease, that's what it's called. She was coming to, and she whispered to him, "There . . . Teresa . . . help her . . ." and he looked where she was pointing, at a woman as pale as crystal, her hair a glowing white, her eyes colorless. "She . . . has . . . lupus . . ." the woman without a nose whispered.

McGrath went to Teresa. She looked up at him with fear and was barely able to say, "Can you . . . please . . . take me to a dark place . . . ?"

He lifted her in his arms. She weighed nothing. He let her direct him up the stairs to the second floor, to the third bedroom off the main corridor. He opened the door and it was musty and unlit. He could barely make out the shape of a bed. He carried her over and placed her gently on the puffy down comforter. She reached up and touched his hand. "Thank you." She spoke haltingly, having trouble breathing. "We, we didn't expect anything . . . like that . . ."

McGrath was frantic. He didn't know what had happened, didn't know what he had done to them. He felt awful, felt responsible, *but he didn't know what he had done!*

"Go back to them," she whispered. "Help them."

"Where is the woman who touched me . . . ?"

He heard her sobbing. "She's gone. Lurene is gone. It wasn't your fault. We didn't expect anything . . . like . . . that."

He rushed back downstairs.

They were helping one another. Anna Picket had brought water, and bottles of medicine, and wet cloths. They were helping one another. The healthier ones limping and crawling to the ones still unconscious or groaning in pain. And he smelled the fried metal scent of ozone in the air. There was a charred patch on the ceiling above the chair where the burned woman had been sitting.

He tried to help Anna Picket, but when she realized it was McGrath, she slapped his hand away. Then she gasped, and her hand flew to her mouth, and she began to cry again, and reached out to apologize. "Oh, my God, I'm so *sorry*! It wasn't your fault. You couldn't know . . . not even Lurene knew." She swabbed at her eyes, and laid a hand on his chest. "Go outside. Please. I'll be there in a moment."

A wide streak of dove-gray now bolted through her tangled hair. It had not been there before the instant of his sleep.

He went outside and stood under the stars. It was night, but it had not

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been night before Lurene had touched him. He stared up at the cold points of light, and the sense of irreparable loss overwhelmed him. He wanted to sink to his knees, letting his life ebb into the ground, freeing him from this misery that would not let him breathe. He thought of Victor, and the casket being cranked down into the earth, as Sally clung to him, murmuring words he could not understand, and hitting him again and again on the chest; not hard, but without measure, without meaning, with nothing but simple human misery. He thought of Alan, dying in a Hollywood apartment from AIDS, tended by his mother and sister who were, themselves, hysterical and constantly praying, asking Jesus to help them; dying in that apartment with the two roommates who had been sharing the rent keeping to themselves, eating off paper plates for fear of contracting the plague, trying to figure out if they could get a lawyer to force Alan's removal; dying in that miserable apartment because the Kaiser Hospital had found a way around his coverage, and had forced him into "home care." He thought of Emily, lying dead beside her bed, having just dressed for dinner with her daughter, being struck by the grand mal seizure and her heart exploding, lying there for a day, dressed for a dinner she would never eat, with a daughter she would never again see. He thought of Mike, trying to smile from the hospital bed, and forgetting from moment to moment who Lonny was, as the tumor consumed his brain. He thought of Ted seeking shamans and homeopathists, running full tilt till he was cut down. He thought of Roy, all alone now that DeeDee was gone: half a unit, a severed dream, an incomplete conversation. He stood there with his head in his hands, rocking back and forth, trying to ease the pain.

When Anna Picket touched him, he started violently, a small cry of desolation razoring into the darkness.

"What *happened* in there?" he demanded. "Who *are* you people? What did I do to you? Please, oh please I'm asking you, tell me *what's going on*!"

"We absorb."

"I don't know what—"

"We take illness. We've always been with you. As far back as we can know. We have always had that capacity, to assume the illness. There aren't many of us, but we're everywhere. We absorb. We try to help. As Jesus wrapped himself in the leper's garments, as he touched the lame and the blind, and they were healed. I don't know where it comes from, some sort of intense empathy. But . . . we do it . . . we absorb."

"And with me . . . what was that in there . . . ?"

"We didn't know. We thought it was just the heartache. We've encountered it before. That was why Tricia suggested you come to the Group."

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"My wife . . . is Tricia one of you? Can she . . . take on the . . . does she absorb? I lived with her, I never—"

Anna was shaking her head. "No, Tricia has no idea what we are. She's never been here. Very few people have been so needing that I've brought them here. But she's a fine therapist, and we've helped a few of her patients. She thought of you . . ." She paused. "She still cares for you. She felt your pain, and thought the Group might be able to help. She doesn't even know of the *real* REM Group."

He grabbed her by the shoulders, intense now.

"What happened in there?"

She bit her lip and closed her eyes tightly against the memory. "It was as you said. The mouth. We'd never seen that before. It, it *opened.* And then . . . and then . . . "

He shook her. *"What!?!"*

She wailed against the memory. The sound slammed against him and against the hills and against the cold points of the stars. "Mouths. In each of us! Opened. And the wind, it, it just, it just *hissed* out of us, each of us. And the pain we held, no, that *they* held—I'm just their contact for the world, they can't go anywhere, so I go and shop and bring and do—the pain *they* absorbed, it, it took some of them. Lurene and Margid . . . Teresa won't live . . . I know . . . "

McGrath was raving now. His head was about to burst. He shook her as she cried and moaned, demanding, "What's happening to us, what am I doing, why is this doing to us now, what's going wrong, please, you've go to help me, we've got to *do* something—"

And they hugged each other, clinging tightly to the only thing that promised support: each other. The sky wheeled above them, and the ground seemed to fall away. But they kept their balance, and finally she pushed him to arm's length and looked closely at his face and said, "I don't know. I *do not* know. This isn't like anything we've experienced before. Not even Alvarez or Ariès knows about this. A wind, a terrible wind, something alive, leaving the body."

"Help me!"

"I *can't* help you! No one can help you, I don't think *anyone* can help you. Not even Le Braz . . ."

He clutched at the name. "Le Braz! Who's Le Braz?"

"No, you don't want to see Le Braz. Please, listen to me, try to go off where it's quiet, and lonely, and try to handle it yourself, that's the only way!"

"Tell me who Le Braz is!"

She slapped him. "You're not hearing me. If *we* can't do for you, then no one can. Le Braz is beyond anything we know, he can't be trusted, he

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does things that are outside, that are awful, I think. I don't really know. I went to him once, years ago, it's not something you want to—"

I don't care, he said. I don't care about any of it now. I have to rid myself of this. It's too terrible to live with. I see their faces. They're calling and I can't answer them. They plead with me to say something to them. I don't know what to say. I can't sleep. And when I sleep I dream of them. I can't live like this, because this isn't living. So tell me how to find Le Braz. I don't care, to hell with the whole thing, I just don't give a damn, *so tell me!*

She slapped him again. Much harder. And again. And he took it. And finally she told him.

He had been an abortionist. In the days before it was legal, he had been the last hope for hundreds of women. Once, long before, he had been a surgeon. But they had taken that away from him. So he did what he could do. In the days when women went to small rooms with long tables, or to coat hangers, he had helped. He had charged two hundred dollars, just to keep up with supplies. In those days of secret thousands in brown paper bags stored in clothes closets, two hundred dollars was as if he had done the work for free. And they had put him in prison. But when he came out, he went back at it.

Anna Picket told McGrath that there had been other . . .

. . . work. Other experiments. She had said the word *experiments,* with a tone in her voice that made McGrath shudder. And she had said again, "For McGrath hath murdered sleep," and he asked her if he could take her car, and she said yes, and he had driven back to the 101 Freeway and headed north toward Santa Barbara, where Anna Picket said Le Braz now lived, and had lived for years, in total seclusion.

It was difficult locating his estate. The only gas station open in Santa Barbara at that hour did not carry maps. It had been years since free maps had been a courtesy of gas stations. Like so many other small courtesies in McGrath's world that had been spirited away before he could lodge a complaint. But there was no complaint department, in any case.

So he went to the Hotel Miramar, and the night clerk was a woman in her sixties who knew every street in Santa Barbara and knew very well the location of the Le Braz "place." She looked at McGrath as if he had asked her the location of the local abattoir. But she gave him explicit directions, and he thanked her, and she didn't say you're welcome, and he left. It was just lightening in the east as dawn approached.

By the time he found the private drive that climbed through heavy woods to the high-fenced estate, it was fully light. Sun poured across the channel and made the foliage seem Rain Forest lush. He looked back

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over his shoulder as he stepped out of the Le Sabre, and the Santa Monica Channel was silver and rippled and utterly oblivious to shadows left behind from the night.

He walked to the gate, and pressed the button on the intercom system. He waited, and pressed it again. Then a voice—he could not tell if it was male or female, young or old—crackled, "Who is it?"

"I've come from Anna Picket and the REM Group." He paused a moment, and when the silence persisted, he added, "The *real* REM Group. Women in a house in Hidden Hills."

The voice said, "Who are you? What's your name?"

"It doesn't matter. You don't know me. McGrath, my name is McGrath. I came a long way to see Le Braz."

"About what?"

"Open the gate and you'll know."

"We don't have visitors."

"I saw . . . there was a . . . I woke up suddenly, there was a, a kind of *mouth* in my body . . . a wind passed . . ."

There was a whirring sound, and the iron gate began to withdraw into the brick wall. McGrath rushed back to the car and started the engine. As the gate opened completely, he decked the accelerator and leaped through, even as the gate began without hesitation to close.

He drove up the winding drive through the Rain Forest, and when he came out at the top, the large, fieldstone mansion sat there, hidden from all sides by tall stands of trees and thick foliage. He pulled up on the crushed rock drive, and sat for a moment staring at the leaded windows that looked down emptily. It was cool here, and dusky, even though it was burgeoning day. He got out and went to the carved oak door. He was reaching for the knocker when the door was opened. By a ruined thing.

McGrath couldn't help himself. He gasped and fell back, his hands coming up in front of him as if to ward off any approach by the barely human being that stood in the entranceway.

It was horribly pink where it was not burned. At first McGrath thought it was a woman, that was his quick impression; but then he could not discern its sex, it might have been male. It had certainly been tortured in flames. The head was without hair, almost without skin that was not charred black. There seemed to be too many bends and joints in the arms. The sense that it was female came from the floor-length wide skirt it wore. He was spared the sight of the lower body, but he could tell there was considerable bulk there, a bulk that seemed to move gelatinously, as if neither human torso nor human legs lay within the circle of fabric.

And the creature stared at him from one milky eye, and one eye so pure and blue that his heart ached with the beauty of it. As features

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between the eyes and the chin that became part of the chest, without discernible neck; there were only charred knobs and bumps, and a lipless mouth blacker than the surrounding flesh. "Come inside," the doorkeeper said.

McGrath hesitated.

"Or go away," it said.

Lonny McGrath drew a deep breath and passed through. The doorkeeper moved aside only a trifle. They touched: blackened hip, back of a normal hand.

Closed and double-bolted, the passage out was now denied McGrath. He followed the asexual creature through a long, high-ceilinged foyer to a closed, heavily-paneled door to the right of a spiral staircase that led to the floor above. The thing, either man or woman, indicated he should enter. Then it shambled away, toward the rear of the mansion.

McGrath stood a moment, then turned the ornate L-shaped door handle, and entered. The heavy drapes were drawn against the morning light, but in the outlaw beams that latticed the room here and there, he saw an old man sitting in a high-backed chair, a lap robe concealing his legs. He stepped inside the library, for library it had to be: floor to ceiling bookcases, spilling their contents in teetering stacks all around the floor. Music swirled through the room. Classical music; McGrath didn't recognize it.

"Dr. Le Braz?" he said. The old man did not move. His head lay sunk on his chest. His eyes were closed. McGrath moved closer. The music swelled toward a crescendo, something symphonic. Now he was only three steps from the old man, and he called the name Le Braz again.

The eyes opened, and the leonine head rose. He stared at McGrath unblinkingly. The music came to an end. Silence filled the library.

The old man smiled sadly. And all ominousness left the space between them. It was a sweet smile. He inclined his head toward a stool beside the wingback. McGrath tried to give back a small smile, and took the seat offered.

"It is my hope that you are not here to solicit my endorsement for some new pharmacological product," the old man said.

"Are you Dr. Le Braz?"

"It is I who was, once, known by that name, yes."

"You have to help me."

Le Braz looked at him. There had been such a depth of ocean in the words McGrath had spoken, such a descent into stony caverns that all casualness was instantly denied. "Help you?"

"Yes. Please. I can't bear what I'm feeling. I've been through so much, seen so much these last months, I . . ."

"Help you?" the old man said again, whispering the phrase as if it had

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been rendered in a lost language. "I cannot even help myself . . . how can I possibly help you, young man?"

McGrath told him. Everything.

At some point the blackened creature entered the room, but McGrath was unaware of its presence till he had completed his story. Then, from behind him, he heard it say, "You are a remarkable person. Not one living person in a million has ever seen the Thanatos mouth. Not one in a hundred million has felt the passage of the soul. Not one in the memory of the human race has been so tormented that he thought it was real, and not a dream."

McGrath stared at the creature. It came lumbering across the room and stood just behind the old man's chair, not touching him. The old man sighed and closed his eyes.

The creature said, "This was Josef Le Braz, who lived and worked and cared for his fellow man, and woman. He saved lives, and he married out of love, and he pledged himself to leave the world slightly better for his passage. And his wife died, and he fell into a well of melancholy such as no man had ever suffered. And one night he woke, feeling a chill, but he did not see the Thanatos mouth. All he knew was that he missed his wife so terribly that he wanted to end his life."

McGrath sat silently. He had no idea what this meant, this history of the desolate figure under the lap robe. But he waited, because if no help lay here in this house, of all houses secret and open in the world, then he knew that the next step for him was to buy a gun and to disperse the gray mist under which he lived.

Le Braz looked up. He drew in a deep breath and turned his eyes to McGrath. "I went to the machine," he said. "I sought the aid of the circuit and the chip. I was cold, and could never stop crying. I missed her so, it was unbearable."

The creature came around the wingback and stood over McGrath. "He brought her back from the Other Side."

McGrath's eyes widened. He understood.

The room was silent, building to a crescendo. He tried to get off the low stool, but he couldn't move. The creature stared down at him with its one gorgeous blue eye and its one unseeing milky marble. "He deprived her of peace. Now she must live on, in this half-life.

"This is Josef Le Braz, and he cannot support his guilt."

The old man was crying now. McGrath thought if one more tear was shed in the world he would say to hell with it and go for the gun. "Do you understand?" the old man said softly.

"Do you take the point?" the creature said.

McGrath's hands came up, open and empty. "The mouth . . . the wind . . ."

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"The function of dream sleep," the creature said, "is to permit us to live. To flense the mind of that which dismays us. Otherwise, how could we bear the sorrow? The memories are their legacy, the parts of themselves left with us when they depart. But they are not whole, they are joys crying to be reunited with the one to whom they belong. You have seen the Thanatos mouth, you have felt a loved one departing. It should have freed you."

McGrath shook his head slowly, slowly. No, it didn't free me, it enslaved me, it torments me. No, slowly, no. I cannot bear it.

"Then you do not yet take the point, do you?"

The creature touched the old man's sunken cheek with a charred twig that had been a hand. The old man tried to look up with affection, but his head would not come around. "You must let it go, all of it," Le Braz said. "There is no other answer. Let it go . . . let *them* go. Give them back the parts they need to be whole on the Other Side, and let them in the name of kindness have the peace to which they are entitled."

"Let the mouth open," the creature said. "We cannot abide here. Let the wind of the soul pass through, and take the emptiness as release." And she said, "Let me tell you what it's like on the Other Side. Perhaps it will help."

McGrath laid a hand on his side. It hurt terribly, as of legions battering for release on a locked door.

He retraced his steps. He went back through previous days as if he were sleepwalking. *I don't see it here anywhere.*

He stayed at the ranch-style house in Hidden Hills, and helped Anna Picket as best he could. She drove him back to the city, and he picked up his car from the street in front of the office building on Pico. He put the three parking tickets in the glove compartment. That was work for the living. He went back to his apartment, and he took off his clothes, and he bathed. He lay naked on the bed where it had all started, and he tried to sleep. There were dreams. Dreams of smiling faces, and dreams of children he had known. Dreams of kindness, and dreams of hands that had held him.

And sometime during the long night, a breeze blew.

But he never felt it.

And when he awoke, it was cooler in the world than it had been for a very long time; and when he cried for them, he was, at last, able to say goodbye.

A man is what he does with his attention.
John Ciardi

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ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

We may be presently witnessing the birth of a genuine new artform, something that has occurred but rarely in the long sweep of human history.

I'm not talking about a new formal conceptualization within an existing artistic medium, such as Cubism or the symphony or the novel, nor am I talking about a new style, such as blank verse or modern dance or rock and roll, nor am I talking about new content, such as the rock opera or the underground comic or science fiction itself.

I'm talking about a whole new medium of expression, such as painting, theater, prose fiction, opera, film, or television—a new way of communicating human artistic impulses.

The further back in human history we go, the more basic and drastic such invention seems. Beating two rocks together to produce the first instrumental music. Shaping a glob of clay into a form mimicking a man or an animal. Smearing colored pigments on a cave wall to produce the first painting. The written word.

Now it would admittedly be a bit much to suggest that the development of the graphic novel in our own time is an artistic invention of *this* order of magnitude, but as human culture evolved and recomplicated, as music, sculpture, painting, architecture, dance, theater, and the written word became well-established, the nature of the evolution of new artforms changed, became more a matter of synergy and convergence than of drastic new invention.

The oral bardic storytelling tradition merged with the written word and prose fiction and theater eventually evolved. Orchestral music merged with dance to create the ballet. Dance, song, instrumental music, theater, painting, and much more came together to create the opera.

In fact opera is probably the best paradigm for how human artforms evolved during this middle pretechnological period. In its day, which is to say prior to the development of the sound motion picture, grand opera was the ultimate human artform, combining as it did most of the others.

Grand opera, after all, first involves a story which must be writ-

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ten down in prose. Then a libretto must be written and a score created. Dance numbers are choreographed. Sets are constructed and painted and costumes sewn together. Finally, all of this is put together inside a theater with an orchestra and actors who are also singers, and the baton comes down, and the curtain goes up, and voilà, an incredibly complex artform that fuses theater with music and dance and elaborate costume and set design and even special effects, surely the crown of nineteenth century artistic creation.

After which, technology begins to dominate the evolution of human artforms.

Photography is invented, and for the first time frozen moments from the real world can be permanently recorded as perfectly mimetic images, a brand new artform in itself, but one that was also to drastically alter the nature of painting and sculpture away from their technologically obsoleted drive towards better and better mimesis and towards non-representational conceptualization.

The phonograph is invented and later the tape recording, eventually leading to just as drastic an evolution in the nature of music. Prior to the invention of sound recording, editing, and processing, all our musical experience was that of the live performance, with all its mistakes, flaws, spontaneity, and human limits.

Now, of course, most of the music we hear is edited, multitracked, processed, and perfected through mixing boards into something far beyond the ability of an ensemble of live performers coming together before a live audience at a given locus in space and time. Modern music is an *edited and editable* artform—or series of artforms—that transcends the natural capabilities of the human voice and the ranges of acoustical instruments as well as the spatial and temporal limits of live performance. So too has it been centralized from an isolated performance to be attended into an omnipresent background to our daily lives.

And then technology animates the photograph to produce the motion picture. And gives it a sound track. And full color. At which point film supplants opera as the ultimate synergetic artform, a position from which the later invention of television has still not quite yet managed to displace it.

What does all this have to do with the graphic novel?

Quite a bit. For the graphic novel is precisely a new artform in the sense of opera or musical recording or the motion picture. It has at least the potential to do for the fictional narrative in book form what opera did for theatrical performance and sound mixing and processing did for music and the motion picture did for drama. And there are signs that it is beginning to live up to that transformational potential.

In a certain sense there is nothing new in the graphic novel at all,

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which is to say that the elements which have come together to create this new artform, like the elements which came together to create grand opera, have had long separate pre-existence. Painting has roots deep in pre-history and so does story-telling, and indeed both predate the written word and printing.

Indeed it could be argued that the written word itself evolved out of something not that far removed from the graphic narrative. Look at Egyptian hieroglyphs (and the Mayan equivalent too) from a certain skewed perspective, and they can be viewed as something akin to comic books.

Hieroglyphs (particularly in earlier periods) are pictographs representing words that are recognizable stylizations of the things they represent, and they are laid out in sequential panels to carry a narrative. Later they were further stylized into a partially phonetic alphabet which broke into more recognizable pictographs for emphasis or clarity. They were even integrated with splash-panels.

Who knows how narrative writing might have evolved if the Phoenicians had not evolved a purely phonetic alphabet divorced from pictographic representation of words and passed it on to the Greeks and thence to us? Or if the Egyptians had separated out their phonetic syllabary from their pictographs and started writing novels in a syntax incorporating both.

In *our* alternate world, however, prose and pictorial representation diverged early on, and didn't recombine into a synergetic artform until the emergence of the comic strip.

Now Egyptian hieroglyphs evolved to express the very theocratic basis of their culture, and the Mayan Codex was not exactly pop culture either, but when the graphic narrative re-emerged as a consequence of cheap mass printing, it was as comic relief in throwaway daily newspapers and pulpy trash our mothers all threw away in horror, to the enrichment of future generations of comic book dealers.

Low comedy and talking animals. Superheroes in fancy spandex longjohns. Green slime and red gore. Teen-age romance and shoot 'em up adventures. Not exactly stuff to stand beside the tomb of Tutankhamen as a peak artistic expression of its culture.

Let's face it, the graphic narrative re-emerged as a vehicle for schlock, as a commercial entertainment designed to appeal to a lowest common denominator audience. We know what we mean when we say some boob has a "comic book mentality," and "cartoony" is a synonym for oversimplified rendering of reality.

The function to which the graphic narrative was put long obscured the inherent potential of the form. But in retrospect, we can see that that potential was always there, waiting for more serious content to stretch it into a serious artform.

In the 1950s, that thematic deepening began to occur in the most

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unlikely of venues—the E.C. Comics that so horrified the adult world that Congressional hearings were held to condemn them and the Comics Code was promulgated to suppress them. The Vault Keeper, the Cryptkeeper, and their whole gang of slime-dripping ghouls and fiends were admittedly not exactly literary drawing-room company, but the horror comics at least had a moral stance and were beginning to express a cultural viewpoint.

Sure, it was all severed heads and spurting gore and exploding intestines, but the world of E.C. was a moral one of some complexity, if little subtlety. Villainy was punished with sadistic glee and sympathetic characters were seldom fed to the toilet monster, but villains and heroes were not necessarily defined by the standards of Eisenhower era adulthood. And cultural style had a lot to do with it. The shock and barf esthetic was that of a generation of near-pubescents who would soon enough be outraging their parents even further to the dirty beat of Elvis.

E.C. comics expressed the subculture of adolescent weirdos who delighted in horrifying adult society but who had cultural standards of their own, which was precisely why adult society eventually suppressed them. But it was too late. The genie was out of the bottle.

The E.C. horror comics, like the science fiction of the 1950s, were a commercial genre in the process of evolving into a self-conscious artform along with the generation of maturing adolescents whom they were both primarily addressing. And there were many cross-overs. E.C. did "Weird Science" and "Weird Fantasy," comics devoted to unabashed science fiction of some subtlety and sophistication, up to and including graphic narrative translations of stories by SF writers of the caliber of Ray Bradbury. Even the horror comics had a certain SF feel to them, a certain speculative logicality incorporated into their storylines, and a certain hard science realism when it came to the pictorial portrayal of the guts and gore.

The audiences overlapped heavily, too. Many E.C. fans read science fiction, many SF fans read the E.C. comics, and many latter day science fiction writers, comics writers, and artists, grew up as demented kids on both.

Science fiction continued to mature with its audience, but after the Comics Code reduced the graphic narrative to that which parents found harmless to their all-too-impressionable children, comics went in the direction of Superman and Captain Marvel and Batman and eventually the mind-boggling armies of costumed superheroes churned out by DC and Marvel.

Well, not entirely.

While the E.C. generation of science fiction writers was helping to create the New Wave in the 1960s, the E.C. generation of artist-writers were helping to create the Underground Comics.

The Underground Comics were

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to the commercial stuff produced under the constraints of the Comics Code what underground newspapers like the Los Angeles *Free Press* were to the New York *Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor*.

They were guerrilla art, published and distributed by guerrilla companies, openly defiant of every public convention they could manage to violate, and drawing their creative energy precisely from the freedom of their self-proclaimed outlawry.

Interestingly enough, while the overground comics were almost always produced by teams of writers, artists, inkers, and letterers, the Underground Comics were usually the product of a single consciousness, like R. Crumb, S. Clay Wilson, and Art Spiegelman, who wrote and drew and even colored and lettered all their own stuff.

Questions of content and quality aside, it is certainly fair to say that the overground comics expressed corporate formats carried out by a collectivity in the manner of network television, whereas the Undergrounds were vehicles of personal expression for graphic narrative auteurs.

Then the wheel turned again, and the Underground Press faded away as the Counterculture became history and the Underground Comics dwindled away into remnants and the corporate product of DC and Marvel prevailed. Which is to say that the graphic novel auteurs had few viable markets for their outré personal visions.

In the United States, that is.

In France, the auteur brand of graphic narrative flourished, and moved out into new media. The magazine *Metal Hurlant* published graphic narratives alongside prose in a slick format aimed more or less at adults and with an artistic freedom reminiscent of that of the American Undergrounds. And unlike us, the French had a good name for it. "Bande desinée," they call it, meaning, literally "designed band," a label referring strictly to the graphic narrative *form*, not the content, as we do in English with the term "comic book."

What's in a name? In some cases, plenty. French bande desinée is under no definitional imperative to be funny, nor to be published in any particular commercial format.

Take, for instance, a prime example of the bande desinée at the top of its form, Philippe Druillet's *Salambo* trilogy. This is Druillet's utterly transformed version of the novel by Gustave Flaubert, and it was published in full color on high quality slick paper as three coffee-table sized hardcover books, inarguably a full-blown graphic novel in every sense of the term. And indeed the full-color hardcover "album" is a more dominant publishing mode for the graphic narrative in France than the cheap throwaway comic book, leading perhaps in large part to the perception in French cultural circles that the bande desinée is a legitimate and serious artform.

Druillet was one of the founders

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of *Metal Hurlant*, certainly one of the two or three most influential figures in the development of the bande desinée, and *Salambo* is typical of Druillet at the top of his form.

There is certainly nothing "comic" about this violent tale of conflict and revolution, not a single laugh in the whole thing. The storyline, such as it is, moves like a Ballard condensed novel or something by William Burroughs. It is very violent indeed, full of grand guignol battle scenes.

It is also very beautiful.

Druillet is a gallery artist of some reknown, and a most painterly "comic" artist. He almost entirely eschews the familiar linear comic panel layout, just as he eschews the straightforward linearity of traditional graphic narration. Every page, or in some cases two page spread, is laid out and designed like a self-contained diptych or triptych or quadratych, desinée to the max, but not in relentless bande format. Druillet also turns whole pages into single complex paintings integrated thematically and psychically with the text. Other pages have an architectural design—oddly shaped panels integrated in an overall design with captions and speech balloons and incidental interstitial art.

Druillet's visual style is neither "cartoony" nor realistic. His panels tend to be as densely and ghoulishly populated as a Bosch painting, as complexly rendered as Dali, as brooding and involuted as Giger, as baroquely furnished as Versaille, and for want of a better term, as realistically surreal as science fiction.

Which Druillet's work in fact is.

If the paintings of Chesley Bonestell are the visual cognates of the hard SF school of Clarke and Caiden and Benford, the graphic novels of Philippe Druillet are the visual cognates of the school of Leigh Brackett, Jack Vance, Ray Bradbury, the SF of the baroque.

Nor is he alone in this. For while Druillet is certainly by far the best artist in a painterly sense ever to work in the graphic novel, he is a central influence on the bande desinée, not a sui generis outsider, and most of the French stuff is SF of one kind or another.

As is almost all of the stuff published in the American version of *Metal Hurlant, Heavy Metal*. While *Heavy Metal* leans very heavily on translation from the French, its American contributors all do science fiction and fantasy too.

Indeed, today almost all graphic narrative is SF of one kind or another, from the contents of *Heavy Metal* to Superman and Batman and all the other superheroes to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. One could even argue that there is something intrinsic to the graphic narrative form that skews it towards science fiction and fantasy.

Why should this be so? True, there have been comic genres which have dealt with the mundane here and now. But the graphic narrative is a *visual* form and virtually re-

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quires story and setting scope for flamboyant art with movement and conflict and outré realities. Then, too, comic art is a highly stylized and conceptualized form, inherently non-mimetic, and inherently action oriented, for there is little reason for anyone to want to see a lot of realistically rendered talking heads when prose narrative does this so much better.

In more innocent days, when the average comic reader was a prepubescent child, funny animals doing funny things would suffice (though the doings of the ducks in Carl Barks' *Uncle Scrooge* already have a decidedly science fictional flavor), and teen-agers would wallow happily in gore and war (though E.C. did a lot of SF), but now that the median age of the comic buyer is in the twenties, more sophisticated content is required, and about the only place to go for sophisticated content that may be expressed graphically in visually active style is fantasy and science fiction.

You *could* in theory go to the historical period drama, but today's readers are a lot more interested in the future than in the past, and then, too, today's sophisticated twenty-year-old comic book reader probably grew up on superheroes.

After the demise of the flourishing Underground Comics, the superheroes conquered all, and of course you can't have a superhero without an SF premise. Superman is of course the template—a character with superpowers determined by the story of his alien origin—and almost all the rest are variations on this format.

These superhero comics have with very few exceptions been corporate format product, with endlessly recomplicating back stories and interpenetrations in order to build audience loyalty, and are churned out episode by episode by teams of editors, writers, artists, inkers, and letterers. And if this sounds like a graphic narrative version of episodic network television, well, that's just what it is.

And like network TV, only more so, these comics are produced under censorship, to wit, the Comics Code, which limits their content and language to that which censorious adults deem fit for children.

But today's average comic reader is not a child, but a fairly sophisticated young adult with a grounding in prose SF more often than not, and someone likely to be familiar with the more artistically adventurous French bande desinée school through *Heavy Metal*. And this applies in spades to the writers and artists working in the form.

So by the early 1980s, the ingredients were all there for the emergence of something quite new. Talented writers and artists— refugees from the collapse of the Underground Comics market and toilers in the corporate comics formats—looking for ways to free up the form and find a fitting audience for more outré and mature work. An older and more affluent audience who had outgrown kid stuff.

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Business people who saw how to put one and one together and come up with mucho dinero.

Voilà, the graphic novel, which has been popping up all over of late. Long, generally self-contained graphic narratives, published in trade paperback format, generally in full color, sold in bookstores in large part, and priced accordingly. Books targeted at the sophisticated adult audience who can afford to buy them. *Books*, not comics, meaning free to operate outside the constraints of the Comics Code.

A marketing strategy that has led straight to a quantum leap in the artistic evolution of the graphic narrative from the comic book to the full-blown graphic novel.

A perfect textbook example of this great leap forward is what Frank Miller has done with Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns*.

Now Batman the superhero has been around for decades, probably the best-known superhero with the exception of Superman, and enough of a cultural icon to have inspired a truly dreadful but commercially successful TV series. One would have thought that Batman, Robin, the Joker, et al., would long since have become a series of hopelessly stylized clichés.

"Wrong," sez Frank Miller, who wrote and drew *Dark Knight*, and he proves it by applying the sophisticated extrapolative vision of the science fiction novel to the material. Which is to say he dares to take Batman seriously.

Batman was perhaps the most characterologically interesting of the superheroes to begin with. A self-made superhero with no superhuman powers, driven into his crusade against crime by a thirst for vengeance, and willing to cloak himself in the morally ambiguous mantle of a night creature in the pursuit thereof.

Okay, take such a character seriously, and project him forward into his future and ours. Make Bruce Wayne a man on the verge of growing old, with his alter-ego, Batman, long since retired into legend.

And place him in a Gotham City turned into a behavioral sink urban nightmare, Detroit or New York twenty years on, in an America on the brink of war with the Soviet Union, mutant street gang monsters turned into media stars drooling blood on television, Mad Max out of urban jungle, and what do you get?

You get an aged Batman grunting his way back into some semblance of shape in order to bring back the legend and clean up the shitpile. You get a murderous, savage, bitter old vigilante, kicking evil ass in the name of what's left of civilization as he sees it, which ain't much.

From one point of view, from the point of view of the politicians (who seem to be mostly weak-kneed liberal boobs), and the TV commentators (who seem to be cynical social parasites), you get Batman as a grand guignol Bernhard Goetz.

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But from another point of view —from that of the hapless victims of the city, from that of Batman himself, you get what the situation calls for, a savage survivalist Batman with the gloves off, a guerrilla fighter for the fearful and downtrodden, a monster, yes, but a *necessary* monster under the circumstances.

It is the genius of what Miller has done with a familiar comic character like Batman that he has imbued the stock figure with such depths and portrayed the degenerate Gotham City with such passion that one can never be quite sure what moral stance Miller himself is taking. If he is taking any moral stance at all, rather than simply placing his character in his setting and letting him and the readers try to work out their own moral conclusions.

In this respect, *The Dark Knight Returns* is very much a genuine novel, a story of character at least as much as action, and one constructed with depths that reach beyond the page to touch the ruminations of the reader.

As a *graphic* novel, it is drawn and laid out in rather conventional style. Or is it? It may be drawn and colored and laid out like a conventional comic, but there is one peculiarly cinematic quirk. Miller actually shows us very little of his Gotham City. The action is drawn as if through a camera lens in narrow focus. Close ups. Room interiors. TV screens. Rooftops. Dark alleys. Grottoes. Garbage dumps. It would seem almost as if Miller is trying to restrict himself to a montage of fragmented tight shots and eschewing the orienting establishment shots in order to graphically portray the fragmented, isolated, paranoically narrow realities that make up his extrapolated urban environment. Or has he really succeeded in getting graphic style to mirror his Batman's own worldview?

Greenberg the Vampire, written by J.M. DeMatteis and painted by Mark Badger, is in some ways an even more extreme example of the comic book mutated into the true graphic novel via the instrumentality of SF, and certainly a textbook illustration of the extent to which the contemporary graphic novel seems to require some SF or fantasy content to secure commercial viability in book form and price.

Okay, so Oscar Greenberg is a vampire, and he meets up with the demoness Lilith, who has to be exorcised in a big climactic action scene, but all this is in a sense rather pro-forma, for *Greenberg the Vampire* could have worked quite well without it, at least on a story level.

Oscar Greenberg is a writer. His big problem is that he's blocked, beside which being a vampire is at worst a minor annoyance, for in this contemporary urban ambiance, vampires of taste don't bite necks, they drink animal blood at vampire cocktail parties. His longtime girlfriend is the lady that

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made him a vampire, but that hasn't seriously damaged their relationship. Oscar's mother even thinks she's just fine for him.

Oscar is a reasonably well-adjusted vampire until he gets writer's block and signs to do the screenplay from one of his own books, and gets involved with the aforementioned demoness in her incarnation as a starlet and . . .

You get the general idea. *Greenberg the Vampire* is really the story of a blocked writer's brush with Hollywood, and the pressures it puts on his relationships with his family, his mother, and his lover. It could have been called *Greenberg the Writer* and been the story of Oscar's maturation as a writer and a man without Lilith or the vampirism.

Fat chance it would have been publishable that way.

Badger does as good a job as anyone could of making long conversations in interior settings visually interesting. The dialog is sophisticated and witty enough to stand up in the pages of a conventional novel and DeMatteis lets Oscar narrate the captions himself in stream of consciousness and even gives us whole pages of his unadorned prose.

Someday all this may be enough to carry a commercially viable graphic novel, but right now such a work would probably die on the racks. Or at any rate, no one would seem to be willing to publish a graphic novel that would appeal only to an elite audience of literati. Indeed, even in the world of conventional novel publishing, a story about a writer and his career problems is generally regarded as the commercial kiss of death.

So the vampire schtick allowed DeMatteis to get away with something he would have had a hard time publishing as a conventional novel, let alone as a "comic."

The question is whether the vampire schtick was simply a necessary commercial ploy and the firm wedding of the emerging graphic novel to science fiction and fantasy is an affair of shotgun economics, or whether the vampire schtick adds something essential to the work, and SF content is somehow inherent in the formal nature of the graphic novel.

It's not such an easy question to answer. DeMatteis *could* have written *Greenberg* without the supernatural elements and made it work artistically. But then why do it as a *graphic* novel? Or to put it another way around, would the graphic format have done anything to enhance such a story?

Maybe not. Maybe an interior-oriented character novel with stream of consciousness will always be best done in prose. And maybe the graphic novel requires something to give it scope for movement and visual invention —action, exotic setting, surreal characters, visually arresting images. One can get this from ultra-violence, historic settings, fantasy, science fiction, and not from too many other places.

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And maybe one thing more. Maybe the formal potential of the graphic novel as an artform is its unique ability to give us visual images of our interior landscape that exist on two simultaneous levels —as exterior realities in themselves and as symbols for inner reality.

Which is also at the heart of fantasy and particularly science fiction. And indeed, by making Greenberg a vampire and his temptress a demoness, and the death of his mother an act of self-sacrificing exorcism, DeMatteis concretizes the internal struggles in imagery that gives Badger something more interesting to work with in the bargain.

Sometimes commercial constrictions coincide with the formal imperatives of an artform, particularly an artform which, after all, is in its childhood. There must be a *reason* to do a novel in graphic form rather than prose, and in the case of something like *Greenberg,* that reason must be more than an appeal to supposedly semi-literate comic book readers, since the work certainly requires literary sophistication to be enjoyed.

Perhaps that reason also has something to do with *distancing.* For what the graphic novel cannot avoid doing, unlike the prose novel, is transforming everything into scene and concrete image. The experience of reading a prose novel can often be that of inhabiting the bodies and minds of the viewpoint characters, but the experience of reading a graphic novel can perforce only be like that of watching a film, something experienced from an outside viewpoint.

This may be a limitation of the graphic novel as an artform, but it can also be a strength. Film exists as a series of scenes taking place in front of your face too, but they are mimetic images; if the film is good enough, you can imagine that you are really there seeing it.

But the graphic novel is a highly stylized artform. Even the most "realistic" drawing and careful coloring and shadowing do not pretend to photographic realism. And the pictures don't move. What we see is a series of still shots; any illusion of motion is created by the layout, and by artistic conventions like speed-streaking that we have been conditioned to accept. And the pace of the story is the pace at which we read it. When we read a graphic novel, we accept speech balloons and captions and thought balloons and we understand the stylizations that make the difference.

The graphic novel is a heavily stylized form of necessity, but while in certain respects that may be a limitation of the medium, it does permit us to accept stylizations of reality which in some cases can allow us the distance necessary to view emotionally charged material with an engaged heart but a detached eye. Which sometimes gives us a truer vision than a literal mirror of reality.

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Take what Art Spiegelman has done with talking animals in *Maus*.

Maus is nothing less than the story of the destruction of European Jewry during the Holocaust, or rather the volume that has thusfar been published is the first installment of this dark epic, ending in one of the most ghastly cliff-hangers of all time at the gate to Auschwitz.

Maus may be nothing *less* than the story of the Holocaust, but it is something *more* as well. The story is narrated from two viewpoints, one inside the other. In the present day, we have an artist son extracting the tale of the past from his survivor father, with whom he has a very complex and ambiguous relationship, which is quite fully rendered. In the past, we have the viewpoint of the father, Vladek, narrating the events to his son, Artie. So what we have is the immediate story of the younger Vladek's travails in Nazi Europe, framed by the story of his older self's relationship with his son, a portrait of him as both an acting survivalist and an old survivor in America. Vladek the active survivalist is a sympathetic character, but old Vladek the survivor is something of a whining crotchety bastard from the point of view of his son.

And that isn't all by a long shot. The father's full name is Vladek *Spiegelman* and the son's full name is Art Spiegelman—the writer and artist of *Maus* is telling the story of his father and himself, with all the problems and moral ambiguities, even with a certain ruthlessness of insight.

Imagine for a moment that Spiegelman had written this as a conventional prose novel. Difficult, isn't it? One cringes at the thought of reading such an emotionally charged true story of father and son from the point of view of the son, who is frequently openly contemptuous of the doings of a father who is a Holocaust survivor. Imagine how difficult it would have been for Art Spiegelman to attain the artistic detachment, not only from his father, but from himself, to write such a prose novel.

But the graphic novel form makes it all possible. In *Maus*, the Nazis are cats, the Poles are pigs, and the Jews, including Vladek, and *Art Spiegelman* himself, are all mice!

The book is done entirely in black and white line drawings in a layout and style more reminiscent of a newspaper comic strip than a comic book. This subtly associates Vladek's story of the Holocaust with newspaper coverage of the historical events, and gives Artie's present-day frame story the feel of a soap newspaper strip like the old *Mary Worth*.

The story is told in cold chilling detail, the Jews of Poland are not simply given as innocent victims, but are honestly shown as flawed humans doing what they think they must do to survive. Artie and Vladek have a tempestuous present day relationship; at times, the son even expresse hate for his

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father. The dialog is as complex, subtle, and realistic as anything in a novel.

But the characters we see are all pigs and cats and mice.

It's hard to imagine a better example than this of the power of the graphic novel to give the reader —and in this peculiar instance the writer and artist as well—insight into thematic material through distancing. It's even harder to imagine Spiegelman being able to face creating such a thing without this device. It's hard to imagine *Maus* in any other form, for what Spiegelman has done here is possible *only* in the graphic novel.

And what he has done points to the heart of the synergy between science fiction and fantasy content and the graphic novel form, even though there is no such content in *Maus* at all.

Well, not exactly. Talking animals, after all, are not exactly mimesis of contemporary reality. They are a well-established graphic narrative convention that serves the same formal purpose as science fiction or fantasy content in this context while being neither—a distancing device which enables the writer-artist to render inner symbolism concretely and visually and give his graphic narrative a personal style beyond the slavish visual mimesis of photographic realism.

By distancing his gut-wrenching story into the convention of the talking animal strip, he enables the reader to deal with it emotionally with some kind of balance. We're used to *laughing* at talking animals; we certainly don't laugh at these, but we do have a breathing space between ourselves and their anguish. Even as science fiction and fantasy, via the convention of altered reality, allow us a truer mirror of our own reality through the distancing effect of concretized symbolism.

Maus demonstrates what a mature creative sensibility can make of the graphic novel; to anyone who demands the proof of a masterpiece before they are willing to grant the graphic novel the status of a serious artform, here is one.

And *Watchmen,* written by Alan Moore and drawn by Dave Gibbons, is surely another, albeit of an entirely different kind. Whereas Spiegelman comes out of the Undergrounds, Moore and Gibbons come out of the world of commercial comic publishing, and the art and layout of *Watchmen* stick pretty much to the superhero visual style and format, which is to say that *Watchmen,* unlike *Maus,* is quite conventional, formally speaking.

Except for one thing, which we have seen before in *Greenberg the Vampire*—Moore integrates pages of straight prose into the narrative. Well, not exactly *straight* prose. What Moore gives us is a kind of media montage—newspaper stories, magazine interviews, excerpts from books, etc., laid out as they would appear in their actual forms of publication, complete with drawings which we accept as styliza-

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tions of the accompanying photographs.

This prose montage illumines the inner lives of characters, in some cases carries the story forward, gives back story, and establishes the alternate world not only in historical details of its divergences from our own but in the details of its divergent popular culture, down to alternate histories of the counterculture, rock music, and yes, comic books.

In Alan Moore's alternate America, costumed superheroes of a kind were a reality in pre-WW II America, rather gay-hearted innocent vigilantes who masked themselves and dressed up in costumes to fight crime. As a consequence, superhero comics never made it (even Superman was a flop). A dark kind of pirate comic took their place, of which we are given an intercut example, a pirate-reality symbolic displacement of the inner lives of the characters in the main story of *Watchmen*.

You can see the influence of Frank Miller's *Dark Knight* here. Moore takes the costumed crime fighter convention seriously and views it through a science fictional eye. His first generation costumed heroes hang out together, have affairs with each other, even have children together. Second generation costumed heroes inherit the personas of retirees. It's all almost like some kind of fandom, except that the masquerade takes place in the streets and crime-fighting superhero fandom battles real criminals.

But in 1960, an experiment goes wrong, or perhaps too right, and Dr. Jonathan Osterman is given a blast of radiation which turns him into a *real* superhero, or more precisely, gives him extraordinary powers. He can control his atomic structure as well as the structure of other matter. Change his size. Walk through walls. Teleport. Direct energy. Control or dismantle machinery and weapons by act of will. Devastate whole continents, perhaps destroy the world. Or save it.

The *government* turns him into a superhero. They design him a fancy costume (which he later discards in favor of going bright blue nude), name him "Dr. Manhattan" to cash in on the vibes of the Manhattan Project and the Atom Bomb, and launch him with a big TV campaign, seeing him as the ultimate weapon against the Russians in the Cold War.

What raises *Watchmen* to the state of novelistic art is that Moore takes this character *seriously*, views Dr. Manhattan through a true science fictional eye. He has a sex life, he has a stormy love life. His powers affect his personality, making him more and more alien, distancing him from ordinary humanity, turning him stepwise into a creature whose alienness derives not so much from his superpowers as from their effects over time on an ordinary human psyche.

And there is more, much more.

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Rorschach, a retired costumed superhero, always demented, comes out of retirement to seek out the murderer of the Comedian, a costumed superhero type who became something of an Oliver North in spandex underwear in the post-war era. The Owl comes reluctantly out of retirement. This, mind you, after the government has passed a law banning costumed superheroes, except for those in its own employ.

In the meantime, the geopolitical situation is deteriorating around Afghanistan. Adrian Veidt, the smartest man in the world, another superhero, who had retired into the marketing of the merchandising tie-ins of his own image, concocts a crazy plan to save humanity from itself by simulating an alien invasion.

Just when he is needed most, Dr. Manhattan finally decides he has had it with humanity, and teleports to Mars, from which vantage he plans to sit out the impending cataclysm while contemplating the universe.

There is no real point in trying to detail the plots and subplots further. *Watchmen* is a real novel, and a complex one at that.

Formally, it is a lot more complicated than it seems at first. Various viewpoint characters narrate sections. Time moves forward and backward. The pirate comic—drawn in a different style—provides one fugal counterpoint to the main line action, and the media montage provides another.

And there are many, many characters, all quite realistically portrayed. There is the bitter editor of a right-wing yellow rag and his dummkopf flunky. Moore even seems to take a schtick from Dickens or maybe Shakespeare and intercuts street-level commentary from an old newsdealer and the kid who is reading the pirate comic at his newsstand.

Then, too, Moore has a political viewpoint (see his British comic *V*), though it never becomes an ax to grind, and what it does is give his extremely detailed cultural and political extrapolation texture and cutting edge.

One example must be given. We see a newspaper headline that says "RR TO RUN IN 1988?" A little later, the right-wing editor's flunky suggest maybe they should run a piece on Robert Redford, who's running for President. "This is still America!" his boss screams. "Who wants a *cowboy actor* in the White House?"

Watchmen is full of little bits like this that integrate historical speculation with popular culture and that make perfect use of the graphic narrative form to do it. It is a full-sized novel, a complex one, a sophisticated one, and Moore and Gibbons bring it all together in a manner which makes *Watchmen* to the graphic novel what *Don Quixote* was to the prose novel—the first full-scale demonstration of the mature potentials of a new artform in its adolescence.

What will it be when it grows up? ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

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4-6—**PhilCon**. For info, write: **Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101**. Or call: (215) 563-2511 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Philadelphia PA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Adam's Mark Hotel. Guests will include: Orson Scott Card, Robin Wood, George R. R. Martin.

4-6—**NovaCon**. Royal Angus Hotel, Birmingham, England. Garry Kilworth. By the Birmingham SF Group.

11-13—**SciCon**. Holiday Exec. Center, Virginia Beach VA. Brin, artists Mattingly, Cherry, Freas.

11-13—**WindyCon**. Hyatt, Schaumburg IL. Card, Aronica, McKee, Tucker. Chicagoland's big con.

11-13—**OryCon. (503) 283-0802**. Red Lion Columbia River, Portland OR. Shepard, C. Willis, Varley.

18-20—**ConText**. Quality Inn Airport, Columbus OH. Cherryh, Bujold. Serious about written SF.

18-20—**Xanadu. (615) 833-1345**. Nashville TN. More relaxed counterweight to May's Kubla Khan.

18-20—**Contretemps**. Holiday Inn, Council Bluffs IA. Harry Turtledove, Kelly Freas, R. Hevelin.

18-20—**ReaderCon. (617) 576-0415**. Hilton, Lowell (near Boston) MA. Delany. Focus on written SF.

25-27—**LosCon. 11513 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood CA 91601**. Hilton, Pasadena CA. Vonda McIntyre.

25-27—**SiliCon. Box 8029, San Jose CA 95155**. (408) 993-0140. J. Chalker, Foglio, R. Silverberg.

25-27—**Darkóver Grand Council. Box 8113, Silver Spring MD 20907. (202) 737-4609**. Baltimore MD.

25-27—**ConTex. Box 266996, Houston TX 77207. (713) 475-8228**. Some gaming and media orientation.

25-27—**Fantasy Fair. Box 820488, Dallas TX 75382. (214) 349-3367**. Strong comics/media emphasis.

25-27—**ChambanaCon, Box 2908, Springfield IL 62708. (217) 753-8934**. Champaign IL. Relaxed con.

DECEMBER, 1988

2-4—**TropiCon, Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33307**. Poul & Karen Anderson, Walt & Madeleine Willis.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139**. WorldCon in Boston. $70 to 3/15/89.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274**. Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $60 to 12/1/88.

30-Sep. 3—**ConDiego, % Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115**. NASFiC. $55 to mid-1989.

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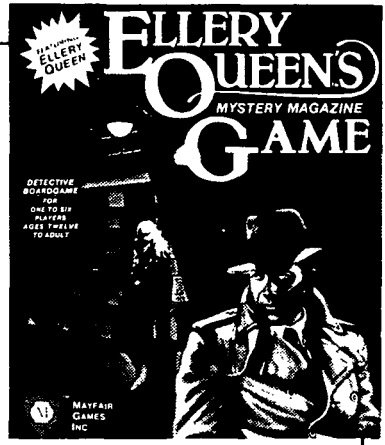

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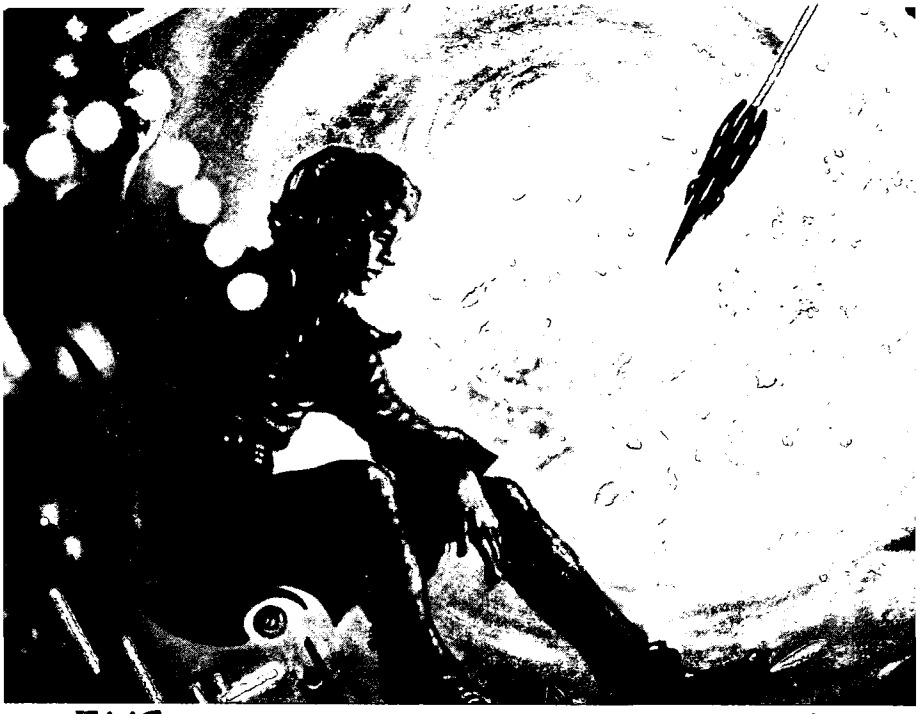

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